



A Study on the  
**“Lost Classrooms:  
Child Marriage in Nepal”**



**Education Watch Report 2025**

# **A Study on the "Lost Classrooms: Child Marriage in Nepal"**

(Education Watch Report 2025)

**Report Produced By**



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**Produced by** Education Watch Group, Nepal

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# Foreword

It gives me great pleasure to present this important study titled "**Lost Classrooms: Child Marriage in Nepal**" Education Watch Report 2025. This report comes at a critical time when Nepal continues to strive toward ensuring equitable, inclusive, and quality education for all, while also addressing persistent social challenges that hinder children's rights and well-being.



Child marriage, including the emerging trend of self-initiated unions among adolescents, remains a complex and deeply rooted issue in Nepal. While significant attention has been given to traditional and family-imposed child marriages, this study sheds light on a less explored yet increasingly relevant dimension adolescents' own agency in initiating early marriages within constrained social, economic, and emotional contexts. This evidence is crucial for understanding the evolving nature of child marriage and its direct implications on education, health, and psychosocial well-being.

The findings of this study clearly demonstrate that child marriage is not driven by a single factor. Rather, it is shaped by an interplay of poverty, social and cultural norms, emotional vulnerabilities, digital influences, and gaps in policy implementation and service delivery. The report also highlights the severe consequences of early marriage, particularly its impact on school dropout, limited life opportunities, health risks, and long-term psychosocial challenges for adolescents.

As Education Watch Group, Nepal, we strongly believe that education is one of the most powerful tools to prevent child marriage and promote the rights and dignity of children. This report reinforces the urgent need for integrated and context-sensitive approaches that combine quality education, effective law enforcement, community engagement, adolescent empowerment, and strengthened support systems.

I would like to express my sincere appreciation to lead researcher Ms. Rupa Munakarmi (PhD), contributors Ms. Sabitri Dahal & Mr. Krishna Govinda Maharjan, and all stakeholders from federal, provincial, and local levels who generously shared their time, insights, and experiences. A special note of thanks goes to Dr. Bidhya Nath Koirala, whose expert review greatly enhanced the clarity and quality of the final report. My gratitude also goes to Loo Niva, Nepal, for serving as the secretariat and supporting this important initiative. This report has been made possible through the generous support of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, channeled through Loo Niva, Nepal, and Interpedia Finland including NEEDS Nepal and KIRDARC Nepal. Their unwavering commitment to strengthening inclusive education and supporting civil society engagement is truly commendable.

It is my hope that the evidence and recommendations presented in this report will serve as a valuable resource for policymakers, educators, development partners, and communities. More importantly, I hope it will contribute to strengthening collective efforts to end child marriage in all its forms and to ensure that every child in Nepal can enjoy their right to education and a safe, dignified future.

**Mr. Narendra Dangol**  
National Convener  
Education Watch Group, Nepal

# Executive Summary

Child including self-initiated and family-imposed unions, remains a significant concern in Nepal, particularly among economically disadvantaged, socially marginalized, and geographically remote communities. This study explores the multidimensional drivers, consequences, and local dynamics of early marriage across several provinces, with a focus on understanding both family-imposed and self-initiated unions. The study aims to generate evidence that can inform policies, interventions, and community programs to prevent child marriage and support adolescent well-being.

This qualitative study used focus group discussions, key informant interviews, and virtual consultations with adolescents, parents, teachers, social workers, and local officials. Data were collected from Koshi, Lumbini, Gandaki, Madhesh, Sudurpaschim, Bagmati, and Karnali Provinces, capturing regional variations in social norms, economic pressures, and law enforcement. In total, 190 participants contributed to the consultations.

Findings reveal a complex interplay of drivers:

- **Economic hardship:** Poverty, dowry pressures, and limited access to education compel families to consider early marriage as a financial and protective strategy.
- **Socio-cultural beliefs:** Misconceptions about health, family honor, and social legitimacy reinforce early unions, while weak legal enforcement and reliance on informal mediation exacerbate the issue.
- **Digital influences:** Exposure to social media and online interactions accelerates adolescent romantic relationships, sometimes resulting in self-initiated early marriages.
- **Perceived maturity and social expectations:** Social and cultural assessments of puberty, gender norms, and expectations about readiness for marriage constrain adolescents' autonomy.
- **Emotional needs:** Adolescents may seek autonomy, social recognition, or escape from household conflict, highlighting the psychosocial dimensions of early marriage.

Child marriage has far-reaching consequences, including early pregnancy and maternal complications, disrupted education, mental health challenges, increased vulnerability to violence and exploitation, and perpetuation of intergenerational poverty and inequality. Societal norms that normalize early marriage further limit adolescent autonomy.

Preventing child marriage requires a multi-dimensional approach that integrates:

- Effective enforcement of child protection laws and robust birth registration systems
- Quality, inclusive, and gender-responsive education with re-enrollment opportunities
- Economic and social support for vulnerable families
- Accessible psychosocial and adolescent-friendly health services
- Community engagement to transform harmful gender and social norms
- Meaningful adolescent participation in decision-making
- Driver-specific interventions and locally responsive support for families and adolescents
- Regular dialogues among students, parents, and teachers to address risks of self-initiated marriage

Child marriage in Nepal is a multifaceted phenomenon driven by economic, social, emotional, and technological factors. Policies and programs must adopt integrated, context-sensitive approaches that protect adolescent rights, promote agency, and support safe transitions to adulthood. Driver-specific solutions, locally responsive support systems, and sustained community engagement, including dialogues with families, teachers, service providers, and adolescents, are critical to preventing both self-initiated and parent-enforced early marriages.

**Professor Dr. Bidya Nath Koirala**  
Educationist

# Introduction of Education Watch Group Nepal

Education Watch is a people-centric right to education movement began in 2015 in Nepal. The focus of Education Watch is on monitoring compliance at both national and local levels in access, enjoyment and utilization of school education by all school aged children. The movement aims to ensure transparency, accountability, and the practical realization of the right to education of children in Nepal. It operates as a loose alliance of civil society organizations, aiming to work within the framework of the right to education and the state's obligations.

The Education Watch campaign work to educate and enhance capacity of civil society, right holders and stakeholders; conduct monitoring and public communication on the status of right to education; promote solidarity and networking among rights based CSOs and people's movements on right to education; empower local level civil societies and children and youth to claim right to education through exercise of civic space.

Education Watch focuses on rights-based, empowerment-focused, critical, and constructive engagement approach to drive change in the education sector and ensure the practical realization of the right to education for all in Nepal. Loo Niva-Nepal is the founding initiator, current convener and secretariat of Education Watch Group.

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## List of Acronyms

|                |  |
|----------------|--|
| <b>CEDAW:</b>  | Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women |
| <b>CRC:</b>    | Convention on the Rights of the Child                                      |
| <b>FGDs:</b>   | Focus Group Discussions  |
| <b>FWLD:</b>   | Forum for women, law and development                                       |
| <b>GEDSI:</b>  | Gender Equality, Disability, and Social Inclusion                          |
| <b>HIV:</b>    | Human immunodeficiency viruses   |
| <b>KIIs:</b>   | Key Informant Interviews   |
| <b>NDHS:</b>   | Nepal Demographic and Health Survey  |
| <b>NGOs:</b>   | Non-Government Organizations   |
| <b>NHRC:</b>   | National Human Right Commission  |
| <b>PTSD:</b>   | Post-traumatic stress disorder   |
| <b>SDG:</b>    | Sustainable Development Goals  |
| <b>UNFPA:</b>  | United Nations Population Fund   |
| <b>UNICEF:</b> | United Nations Children's Fund   |
| <b>WOREC:</b>  | Women's Rehabilitation Centre  |

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# Global Context Of Child Marriage

Child marriage, any formal or informal union involving a person under 18, is recognized globally as a violation of human rights that restricts life choices and limits educational, health, and economic opportunities. Approximately one in five girls worldwide is married before 18, with Sub-Saharan Africa showing the highest rates (30-31%), while South and Central Asia report 25%, and Latin America and the Caribbean 21%. In the United States, 30-35% of adolescents engage in cohabitation, which international agencies including UNICEF and UNFPA recognize as equally harmful. Each year, millions of girls enter early unions, highlighting the persistent global challenge.

Child marriage/teenage cohabitation is most prevalent globally characterized by deep-rooted gender inequality, poverty, lack of educational access, and restrictive social norms that view girls primarily in terms of marriage and domestic roles. International agreements such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) explicitly discourage child marriage, emphasizing children's rights to health, education, and equality. All 193 United Nations Member States, including Nepal, have committed to ending harmful practices such as child marriage under Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Target 5.3 by 2030. Despite these commitments and incremental improvements, progress remains uneven. Globally, the decline in child marriage rates has been insufficient to meet SDG targets.

## a. Child Marriage in Nepal

Child marriage (14.1% in 2021 census) continues to be a significant challenge in Nepal, despite early marriage persists across the country (UNICEF, 2025). Nepal has one of the highest rates of child marriage in South Asia. National and international data indicate that a substantial proportion of women aged 20-24 were married before the age of 18. Over one-third of women in this age group marry before turning 18, and a significant share are married before age 15 (UNICEF, 2025). These early unions are associated with school dropout, reduced educational attainment, and restricted life choices, undermining children's rights and development (UNICEF, 2025). Emerging self-initiated child marriages also contribute to this prevalence, highlighting the need to understand adolescents' own decisions.

While traditional arranged and parental-influenced child marriages have historically been the dominant form, there is growing evidence that self-initiated child marriages and consensual intimate relationships among adolescents are

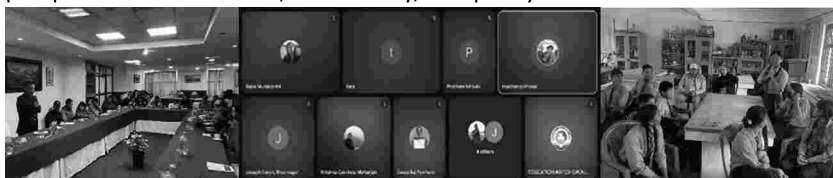
emerging trends (UNICEF, 2025). Adolescents sometimes make autonomous decisions to enter relationships or marriage without adequate parental involvement or preparedness, influenced by peer dynamics, emotional needs, academic pressures, and exposure to social media (UNFPA & Quit.AI, 2023).

Self-initiated child marriage, including cohabitation, occurs when adolescents choose unions without parental coercion, but still face risks due to limited maturity and legal protections. Families often do not approve of such behavior, and in some instances, adolescents may feel pressured to formalize their relationship through early marriage to gain acceptance or social legitimacy. Such self-initiated behaviors carry profound consequences. Early marriage and associated sexual activity can disrupt educational trajectories, leading to school dropout, incomplete education, and reduced future opportunities. Moreover, these experiences increase health risks, including early pregnancy and reproductive complications, and place a substantial psychosocial burden on adolescents, affecting their emotional well-being, self-confidence, and social development (UNICEF, 2025).

Despite the breadth of research on traditionally arranged child marriage, there remains limited empirical evidence specifically examining self-initiated child marriage among school-age adolescents in Nepal (UNICEF, 2025). Most existing literature focuses on overall prevalence, legal frameworks, and the consequences of forced or arranged early marriage, with limited attention to adolescents' own decision-making processes and the unique drivers of self-initiated unions. Addressing this gap is critical to inform evidence-based interventions, policy reforms, and community-level strategies that uphold adolescents' rights to education, health, and overall well-being (UNICEF, 2025; UNFPA & Quit.AI, 2023). But the categories of the driving force of the child marriage/teenage cohabitation and the measures to address them is not explicitly mentioned.

# Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach to gain an in-depth understanding of self-initiated child marriage among school-age adolescents in Nepal, its causes, consequences, and impacts on education, health, and psychosocial well-being. Multiple data collection methods were used to capture perspectives at individual, community, and policy levels.



## 1. Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

A total of 14 key informant interviews were conducted with policymakers at the Ministry of Education, provincial education departments, local government officials, civil society representatives, and media personnel. Similarly, three FGDs were organized with adolescents from selected schools across provinces. Each FGD included 6-8 participants representing diverse backgrounds. The discussions focused on perceptions of self-initiated marriage, challenges in accessing education, and experiences related to social, cultural, and peer influences.

## 2. Provincial Consultation Meetings

The research team conducted two in-person and five virtual consultation meetings to engage local stakeholders, including government officials, civil society organizations, media personnel, child club/network members, and education experts. There were 190 participants from different provincial consultations. These consultations provided provincial-level perspectives on the causes, impacts, and potential strategies to address self-initiated child marriage.

**Table 1: Number of consulted persons during the study**

| Participants  | Municipal representatives | civil society members | Teachers | Students | Total |
|---------------|---------------------------|-----------------------|----------|----------|-------|
| Koshi         | 1                         | 12                    | 1        | 1        | 15    |
| Madhesh       | 1                         | 15                    | 2        | 0        | 18    |
| Bagmati       | 3                         | 36                    | 1        | 14       | 54    |
| Gandaki       | 0                         | 12                    | 2        | 1        | 15    |
| Lumbini       | 1                         | 22                    | 2        | 5        | 39    |
| Karnali       | 0                         | 15                    | 0        | 2        | 17    |
| Sudurpashchim | 4                         | 30                    | 3        | 4        | 41    |
| Total         | 10                        | 142                   | 11       | 27       | 190   |

### **3. Desk Review / Policy Review**

A comprehensive review of national and provincial laws, policies, and strategic frameworks related to child marriage and the right to education was conducted. This included analysis of:

- Existing legislation, regulations, and guidelines addressing child marriage and adolescent rights.
- Education sector plans and policy documents from government, donor agencies, and NGOs.
- Secondary data from surveys and reports, such as the Nepal Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS) and Nepal Education Sector Analysis.

The desk review helped identify gaps in policy implementation, resource allocation, and programmatic responses that may influence self-initiated child marriage and its impact on education and adolescent well-being.

### **4. Data Analysis**

All collected data were transcribed, coded, and analyzed using thematic analysis. Key themes were identified, including the social, cultural, economic, and individual drivers of self-initiated child marriage, its impact on education, health, and psychosocial well-being, and existing strategies for prevention and support. Findings from KIIs, FGDs, consultation meetings, and desk review were triangulated to ensure validity and reliability. Draft results were shared with provincial and national stakeholders for feedback and validation. The final report synthesized validated findings with policy review insights to produce evidence-based recommendations for policymakers, educators, and communities to address self-initiated child marriage and support adolescents' rights, education, and overall well-being.

Ethical and quality standards were strictly maintained throughout the study. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all respondents (and assent from minors with parental consent), and confidentiality was ensured. The research followed principles of transparency, accuracy, and reflexivity, with draft results shared with provincial and national stakeholders for feedback and validation.

# Self Initiated Child Marriage And Its Impact On Education In Nepal: With Global Context And Empirical Evidence

Child marriage, including traditional arranged marriages and self initiated marriages by adolescents themselves remains a profound challenge in Nepal. Despite constitutional and legal provisions setting the minimum age of marriage at 20 years for both sexes, child marriage persists as a human rights violation that undermines children's education, health, and lifelong opportunities (UNICEF & UNFPA, 2017). Globally, the practice affects hundreds of millions of lives, with South Asia alone accounting for nearly 45% of the world's child brides and significantly hindering school participation among married adolescents (UNICEF, 2025). In Nepal, more than one-third of young women aged 20-24 report being married before age 18, and approximately one in ten young men also married as children, making Nepal one of the few countries in South Asia with significant rates for both sexes. Married girls are ten times more likely to be out of school compared to their unmarried peers, while married boys often face pressure to work and support families instead of continuing education (UNICEF, 2025; UNICEF & UNFPA, 2017).

Consultations across the seven provinces indicated that child marriage is influenced by social, economic, and emotional factors beyond traditional norms. Key drivers identified include poverty, insecurity, gendered social norms, and limited opportunities for adolescents. The information thus solicited shows that there are many drivers to encourage children for marriage. These drivers are categorically mentioned in the succeeding paragraphs.

## a. Economic Hardship and Financial Insecurity

Empirical findings from multiple provinces in Nepal reveal that economic hardship remains a central driver of both early and self-initiated child marriages. Teachers and community leaders consistently reported that school dropout often precedes early marriage, particularly for girls from financially constrained households. As one teacher explained, "When girls stop going to school, many parents feel that marriage is the only path left for them." This observation aligns with global and Nepal-specific evidence indicating that poverty is a robust predictor of early marriage, as families may perceive marriage as a means to reduce economic burden or secure household stability (UNICEF & UNFPA, 2020; UNICEF, 2025).

Field data suggest a multidimensional effect of financial insecurity on adolescents' educational engagement. First, parents often cannot meet the costs of schooling, leading them to prioritize marriage over continued education. Second, inadequate school support, such as lack of mid-day meals or financial assistance, limits children's ability to persist in education. Third, adolescents themselves lack avenues to earn supplementary income while studying, further constraining their options. These economic pressures reflect structural vulnerabilities identified in the literature, where poverty interacts with gendered social norms to perpetuate cycles of early marriage and educational disruption (UNFPA, 2025).

In Karnali province, it is not self-initiated, children are forced to get married by their parents. The reason that children get married is due to low economic status, weak in study and found that the behavior of teachers have also encourage children. The teachers say, "You can marry if you study till this level!". This statement also encourages children to get married.

Interestingly, the study also highlighted that adolescent, especially girls, sometimes perceive marriage as a potential escape from strict or conflictual household environments. However, both participants and service providers emphasized that such expectations rarely align with reality; early marriage often increases responsibilities and reduces autonomy. Parents across provinces cited concerns about safety, social reputation, and financial burden as additional motivators, echoing prior research (UNICEF, 2024) indicating that perceptions of risk and insecurity can influence families' marriage decisions.

Frontline service providers, including child protection officers and health workers, corroborated these findings. In contexts where economic hardship is widespread and social protection mechanisms remain weak, families often view early marriage as a strategy to reduce perceived risks and responsibilities. As one parent expressed, "When opportunities for our daughters seem uncertain, some families think marriage will at least provide security." Such insights confirm that economic vulnerability, combined with social and cultural norms, significantly shapes decisions around early and self-initiated marriage, while simultaneously undermining adolescents' educational trajectories.

**Table 2: Drivers of early marriage related to economic hardship**

| Province             | Drivers of Early Marriage  | Impact on Education   |
|----------------------|--|---|
| <b>Sudur Paschim</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Economic hardship and financial insecurity</li> <li>- Limited educational opportunities</li> <li>- Social norms favoring early marriage</li> <li>- Parental concern for safety and family reputation</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Irregular school attendance</li> <li>- Higher dropout rates</li> </ul> |

|                |  |  |
|----------------|--|--|
| <b>Karnali</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Extreme poverty</li> <li>- Lack of nearby schools and long travel distances</li> <li>- Gendered social norms prioritizing marriage</li> <li>- Pressure to reduce household financial burden</li> <li>- Limited awareness of educational benefits</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Early school leaving</li> <li>- Reduced rate of enrollment</li> <li>- Low literacy levels</li> </ul>      |
| <b>Lumbini</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Household poverty</li> <li>- Adolescents seeking escape from strict family conditions</li> <li>- Peer and family pressure to marry</li> <li>- Limited income-generation opportunities while studying</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- School discontinuation</li> <li>- Frequent absenteeism</li> <li>- Reduced learning outcomes</li> </ul>    |
| <b>Gandaki</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Parental insecurity regarding daughters' future</li> <li>- Limited scholarship/support programs</li> <li>- Cultural expectations around domestic responsibilities</li> <li>- Early engagement in household work</li> </ul>                                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Irregular attendance</li> <li>- Increased dropout risk for girls</li> </ul>                               |
| <b>Bagmati</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Family financial constraints</li> <li>- Urban-rural migration pressures</li> <li>- Societal reputation concerns</li> <li>- Perception that marriage provides security</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Interrupted schooling</li> <li>- Lower continuation rates</li> </ul>                                      |
| <b>Madhesh</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Poverty</li> <li>- Dowry and marriage ceremony-related expenses</li> <li>- Social/family pressure</li> <li>- Concerns about early sexual activity</li> <li>- Limited community awareness about education benefits</li> </ul>                                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- High dropout among girls</li> <li>- Reduced progression to higher education</li> </ul>                    |
| <b>Koshi</b>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Economic hardship</li> <li>- Parental pressure to reduce financial responsibility</li> <li>- Safety concerns</li> <li>- Inadequate school support for hunger and educational needs</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- School discontinuation</li> <li>- Irregular attendance</li> <li>- Diminished learning outcomes</li> </ul> |

## **b. Socio-cultural misconceptions about health, family honor, and social legitimacy**

Consultations indicate that socio-cultural misconceptions around health, family honor, and social legitimacy significantly influence early and self-initiated marriage in Nepal. Misinformation, social pressures, and limited awareness about the consequences of early marriage often shape both parental and adolescent decision-making. Health workers reported frequent cases of

adolescent pregnancy among married girls, demonstrating the tangible health risks associated with early unions (UNICEF & UNFPA, 2017). Addressing child marriage therefore requires interventions that go beyond cultural narratives to tackle underlying vulnerabilities such as poverty, discontinuity in education, misinformation, and weak social support systems (Ndwandwe et al., 2020). Strengthening access to education, expanding opportunities for adolescents, and enhancing community awareness were highlighted by participants as critical measures to reduce child marriage.

Voices from participants illustrate the nuanced socio-cultural drivers at the provincial level. In Sudur Paschim, teachers noted that concerns about safety, family honor, and financial insecurity push families toward early marriage. One teacher explained, "When girls stop going to school, many families feel that marriage is the only path left for them," linking socio-cultural anxieties with educational discontinuity. In Karnali, parents expressed anxiety over daughters' reputations, particularly when schools and livelihood opportunities are limited: "We fear that if our daughters grow up too fast, their reputation is at risk. Without enough schools or opportunities nearby, we feel we have no choice." Adolescents confirmed experiencing intense family pressure to marry early, which often leads to leaving school altogether.

In Lumbini, adolescents described marriage as a perceived escape from strict household environments (box 1). This reflects how misconceptions about the benefits of early marriage intersect with peer and familial pressures, resulting in absenteeism and school discontinuation (Raj, Saggurti, Balaiah, & Silverman, 2019). Similarly, in Gandaki, parental anxiety and cultural expectations contribute to irregular school attendance and limited learning opportunities, with a local leader explaining, "We worry about our daughters' future, and sometimes marriage seems the safest option."

Maya, 16, from Lumbini, dreamed of finishing school, but household strictness and family worries about reputation pushed her toward early marriage. *"I thought marriage would give me freedom, but now I see I lost my chance to continue learning,"* she recalls. Economic hardship, social pressure, and misconceptions about safety and honor shaped her decision. Maya's story reflects how poverty, limited schooling, and cultural expectations drive self-initiated child marriages in Nepal

In Bagmati, parents emphasized financial constraints coupled with the belief that marriage ensures social protection: "We think marriage will secure our children's safety and future when opportunities seem uncertain." Such perceptions often disrupt schooling and reduce the likelihood of educational continuation (MoHP, 2022). In Madhesh, dowry pressures, social expectations,

and misconceptions about health and social legitimacy drive early marriages. A mother explained, "Girls are forced to marry early because our community sees it as proper, and we worry about their health and reputation," reflecting the strong influence of local norms on family decisions, which translates into high dropout rates and limited access to higher education (Scott et. al, 2021).

Finally, in Koshi, adolescents and parents reported that economic hardship, inadequate school support, and concerns about safety and social legitimacy collectively encourage early marriage: "Even if my daughter wants to study, we cannot support her, and people judge us if we delay marriage," shared a father. The combination of these pressures results in irregular attendance and diminished learning outcomes.

Overall, data from provinces align with global and national research indicating that misconceptions about family honor, health, and social legitimacy significantly shape adolescent marriage decisions. These socio-cultural drivers operate alongside structural vulnerabilities, such as poverty and limited education, to reinforce early marriage practices. Understanding the interplay of these factors is critical for designing interventions that address both the cultural and structural dimensions of child marriage, ensuring that adolescents are protected and empowered to pursue education and personal development (Ndwandwe et al., 2020; Raj et al., 2019; UNICEF & UNFPA, 2017; Scott et. al, 2021). The table below displays the province specific drivers of early marriage and mentions its impact on education.

**Table 3: Drivers of Early Marriage related to Socio-Cultural Misconceptions**

| Province             | Drivers of Early Marriage   | Impact on Education  |
|----------------------|---|--|
| <b>Sudur Paschim</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Safety concerns</li> <li>- Financial insecurity</li> <li>- Misconceptions about family honor</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Irregular school attendance</li> <li>- Dropouts</li> </ul>              |
| <b>Karnali</b>       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Fear for daughters' reputation</li> <li>- Limited school access</li> <li>- Poverty</li> <li>- Family pressure</li> </ul>                                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Leaving school early</li> <li>- Discontinuation of education</li> </ul> |
| <b>Lumbini</b>       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Desire to escape strict household environments</li> <li>- Family and peer pressure</li> <li>- Misconceptions about benefits of early marriage</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Absenteeism</li> <li>- School discontinuation</li> </ul>                |
| <b>Gandaki</b>       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Cultural expectations</li> <li>- Parental anxiety about daughters' future</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Irregular attendance</li> <li>- Disrupted learning</li> </ul>           |

|                |  |  |
|----------------|--|--|
| <b>Bagmati</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Financial constraints</li> <li>- Beliefs that marriage ensures social protection</li> <li>- Social reputation concerns</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- School interruptions</li> <li>- Reduced continuation rates</li> </ul>             |
| <b>Madhesh</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Dowry pressure</li> <li>- Social/family expectations</li> <li>- Misconceptions about health and social legitimacy</li> </ul>      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- High dropout among girls</li> <li>- Limited access to higher education</li> </ul> |
| <b>Koshi</b>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Economic hardship</li> <li>- Limited school support</li> <li>- Fears about safety and social legitimacy</li> </ul>                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Irregular attendance</li> <li>- Diminished learning outcomes</li> </ul>           |

### **c. Marriage as Emotional Escape and Psychological Security**

Across provinces in Nepal, empirical findings indicate that early and self-initiated marriage is not only shaped by socio-cultural and economic factors but also by adolescents' emotional and psychological needs. Consultations revealed that some young people perceive marriage as a coping mechanism in response to emotional insecurity, particularly in contexts marked by family conflict, neglect, or instability. In such environments, marriage is often imagined as a source of care, safety, and stability, reflecting the intersection of psychosocial vulnerability and structural constraints. This aligns with emerging global evidence suggesting that adolescents may exercise agency within constrained environments, where marriage is seen as a pathway to emotional security rather than solely a culturally imposed practice (UNICEF, 2024; Scott et al., 2021). Some children in Kaski district grow up in families marked by polygamy. These children do not get enough love, care, and attention. Because of this, they develop strong emotional bonds with their partners at a young age and feel closer to them than to their families. In one instance, teenagers repeatedly departed from home for several days to reside with their partners, even subsequent to being returned. These relationships made them feel safe and like they belonged. Counseling revealed that separating them from their partners caused them a lot of emotional pain. In one sad case, a child even killed themselves after being separated. This shows that for some kids, getting married young is not just a social problem but also a way to find emotional support and security.

In Gandaki, parental anxiety and cultural expectations contribute to irregular school attendance and limited learning opportunities (see Box 2 for a detailed case). One of the guardians explained, "We worry about our daughters' future, and sometimes marriage seems the safest option."

Similar patterns emerged in Sudur Paschim Province, where adolescents described how frequent parental disputes and tense home environments influence their decisions. One 16-year-old participant shared, "At home there is shouting every day. When someone shows care, you feel that maybe marriage will give peace." This narrative demonstrates how emotional deprivation and exposure to conflict can heighten adolescents' sensitivity to affection and care, leading them to interpret romantic relationships as pathways to stability. Such findings are consistent with psychosocial research indicating that adolescents experiencing family dysfunction are more likely to seek attachment and validation through early intimate relationships, sometimes culminating in marriage (Raj et al., 2019; Seta, 2023).

#### **Box 1: Emotional Survival Through Marriage**

A school principal described an incident informally called "The Child Who Disappeared for Four Days," where two students aged 12 and 13 went missing and were later found distressed. Follow-up discussions revealed that the children believed marriage "with anyone who would accept them", would provide food, shelter, and protection. A child protection officer explained, "It was not romantic love or rebellion. They were afraid and insecure. For them, marriage meant survival."

In Koshi Province, teachers reported similar cases where emotional neglect and family conflict led adolescents to form early romantic attachments that resulted in marriage. One case from Chulachuli Rural Municipality involved two students who married while still in school, subsequently dropped out, had a child early, and eventually separated. The separation caused significant emotional distress and disrupted both individuals' educational and life trajectories. This example underscores the gap between adolescents' expectations of emotional security through marriage and the lived realities of early union, which often include increased responsibilities, economic hardship, and psychological strain.

Across provinces, these narratives suggest that emotional vulnerability is a critical yet often underexplored driver of child marriage. Feelings of loneliness, lack of parental support, and exposure to unstable home environments push adolescents toward relationships that promise belonging and care. However, these expectations are frequently unmet, resulting in adverse outcomes such as school dropout, early parenthood, and mental health challenges. This reinforces global evidence that child marriage is associated with heightened risks of anxiety, social isolation, and reduced autonomy, particularly when adolescents transition prematurely into adult roles without adequate support systems (UNICEF, 2025; Seta, 2023).

These findings indicate that child marriage can function as a coping strategy in contexts of emotional and structural insecurity. While cultural norms and economic hardship remain important, the role of psychosocial drivers highlights

the need to broaden intervention approaches. Prevention efforts must go beyond legal enforcement and awareness campaigns to include strengthening family relationships, providing adolescent counseling services, and creating safe spaces where young people can express concerns and seek support. Addressing emotional insecurity alongside structural vulnerabilities is essential (UNICEF & UNFPA, 2020; Scott et al., 2022) to reducing both early and self-initiated marriages and supporting adolescents' well-being and educational continuity.

**Table 4: Drivers of early marriage related to Emotional Escape and Psychological Security**

| Province             | Drivers of Early Marriage  | Impact on Education   |
|----------------------|--|---|
| <b>Sudur Paschim</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Frequent parental disputes at home</li> <li>- Tense or conflict-ridden household</li> <li>- Lack of emotional care from family</li> <li>- Marriage seen as source of peace/stability</li> </ul> | Irregular school attendance, absenteeism, potential dropout                   |
| <b>Karnali</b>       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Family neglect or emotional insecurity</li> <li>- Household conflict and instability</li> <li>- Perception that marriage provides safety and belonging</li> </ul>                               | School discontinuation, disrupted learning                                    |
| <b>Lumbini</b>       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Stressful or strict household conditions</li> <li>- Loneliness or lack of emotional support</li> <li>- Early romantic attachments interpreted as care and security</li> </ul>                   | Absenteeism, school dropout, interrupted studies<br>Dropping out,             |
| <b>Gandaki</b>       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Fear and insecurity among young adolescents</li> <li>- Belief that marriage ensures food, shelter, and protection</li> <li>- Emotional withdrawal due to neglect or unstable home</li> </ul>    | withdrawal from learning, emotional stress                                    |
| <b>Bagmati</b>       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Unstable or unsupportive home environment</li> <li>- Lack of parental/adult attention</li> <li>- Marriage as a way to gain attachment or belonging</li> </ul>                                   | Irregular attendance, decreased engagement in school<br>Dropout risk, reduced |
| <b>Madhesh</b>       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Emotional neglect and family conflict</li> <li>- Loneliness and desire for security</li> <li>- Early marriage as coping strategy for psychological distress</li> </ul>                          | opportunity for higher education  |
| <b>Koshi</b>         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Neglect or conflict in family</li> <li>- Seeking emotional attachment through early romantic relationships</li> <li>- Marriage viewed as a solution to insecurity;</li> </ul>                   | Dropping out, interrupted education, emotional stress                         |

## d. Economic Survival and Financial Expectations

Economic hardship emerged as a central driver of child marriage across provinces, with families facing persistent financial stress often viewing marriage as a short-term coping mechanism. In low-income households reliant on subsistence agriculture and daily wage labor, economic shocks, such as crop failure, unemployment, or indebtedness, can quickly destabilize livelihoods and disrupt children's education. Early marriage in these contexts is not merely a cultural practice, but a strategy shaped by structural economic vulnerability (UNICEF, 2024). Some marriage was done by parents were due to temptation to go to abroad in dependent visa like to the country's China and Korea. The foreigners marry young girls and go to abroad. As Pokhara is tourist area, many such cases had occurred though the cases are not registered. Such cases are not registered in police. There is no child friendly law of the province and local government to prevent child marriage. Such issues need to address by CSOs and local government.

### **Box 4: Education Barriers and Early Marriage**

"If there is no human resource but sufficient funding, the local government should take responsibility for managing the Mdm. In some areas, students themselves are involved in agricultural production, which has helped schools become self-sufficient in providing meals. This practice not only sustains the program but also instills valuable agro-based life skills in students."

Economic pressures intersect with local norms in different provinces. In Madhesh, dowry expectations intensify financial burdens, motivating families to arrange marriages earlier to minimize costs, particularly for girls in grades 8-10 (Sekine & Hodgkin, 2017). In Lumbini, long distances to

schools, transportation gaps, and high schooling costs reduce motivation to continue education (See box 4). Similar trends were noted in Sudur Paschim, where marriage is used as a poverty-coping strategy, although service providers emphasized that it rarely improves economic conditions and often increases dependence on spouses or extended family networks. In Dang district, one of the teacher participants said that mostly girls of class 7, 8 dropped out of school for child marriage. Parents admitted their children in private schools in the beginning and in higher class they were sent to government schools, as they cannot afford tuition fees. So, due to that reason, children drop out from the government schools and do child marriage.

### **Box 5: Marriage as Economic Survival**

"When there is no food security, some parents think marriage will reduce one mouth to feed. Sometimes girls themselves say, 'At least there I will eat properly.'" - Social worker, Koshi Province

This story illustrates how both parents and adolescents perceive early marriage as a strategy to meet basic needs like food, clothing, and shelter. While intended as a coping mechanism, these marriages often lead to school dropout, long-term economic dependency, and limited opportunities for adolescents.

Across provinces, these insights demonstrate that economic vulnerability critically shapes early marriage decisions. While families may view marriage as a survival strategy, long-term consequences include interrupted education, limited employment opportunities, and continued cycles of poverty. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive approaches that strengthen household livelihoods, expand access to quality education, and create pathways for adolescents, especially girls, to acquire skills and engage in economic opportunities (UNFPA, 2025).

**Table 5: Drivers of early marriage related to Economic Survival and Expectations**

| Province             | Drivers of Early Marriage (Point-wise)   | Impact on Education (Voices from Participants)                    |
|----------------------|--|---|
| <b>Sudur Paschim</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Poverty and financial hardship</li> <li>- Families view marriage as a way to reduce household economic burden</li> <li>- Adolescents see marriage as access to food, clothing, and shelter</li> </ul>   | Irregular school attendance, dropout, reduced motivation          |
| <b>Karnali</b>       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Persistent household poverty</li> <li>- Economic shocks such as crop failure or unemployment</li> <li>- Marriage seen as financial coping strategy</li> </ul>   | Leaving school early, interrupted learning                        |
| <b>Lumbini</b>       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Long travel distances to schools, limited transportation, and school costs</li> <li>- Adolescents perceive early marriage as inevitable</li> <li>- Economic pressures reduce motivation to continue education</li> </ul>  | Absenteeism, school dropout, discontinuation of studies           |
| <b>Gandaki</b>       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Financial insecurity in families</li> <li>- Economic shocks and limited resources</li> <li>- Perception that marriage alleviates household burden</li> </ul>  | Interruption in schooling, irregular attendance                   |
| <b>Bagmati</b>       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Economic hardship in urban and semi-urban households</li> <li>- Families using marriage to reduce financial pressure</li> <li>- Limited opportunities for income generation while in school</li> </ul>  | School interruptions, absenteeism, dropout                        |
| <b>Madhesh</b>       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Poverty combined with dowry expectations</li> <li>- Social pressure to marry girls early to reduce future financial burden</li> <li>- Marriage seen as financial "necessity"</li> </ul>   | High dropout among girls, limited progression in education        |
| <b>Koshi</b>         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Prolonged family financial difficulties</li> <li>- Marriage viewed by parents and adolescents as a way to meet basic needs</li> <li>- Limited household support for schooling</li> <li>- Marriage viewed as a solution to insecurity; separation causes stress</li> </ul> | Dropping out, interrupted education, reduced future opportunities |

## e. Misconceptions About Health and Legitimacy

Consultations across provinces revealed that misconceptions related to health, family honor, and social legitimacy play a significant role in shaping early marriage decisions in Nepal. Participants consistently emphasized that marriage is often perceived as a socially acceptable solution to manage concerns around romantic relationships, sexuality, and the risk of pregnancy. In such contexts, early marriage is framed not only as a cultural expectation but also as a mechanism to preserve family honor and avoid stigma. These findings align with existing literature indicating that norms surrounding female chastity, reputation, and social legitimacy strongly influence the timing of marriage in South Asian contexts (Scott et al., 2022).

Evidence from Sudurpaschim Province highlights the disconnect between perceived protection and actual health outcomes (See box. 6). Participants further noted that adolescents often have limited knowledge of sexual and reproductive health, which constrains their ability to make informed decisions. Research consistently shows that lack of comprehensive sexuality education contributes to early pregnancy and reinforces the likelihood of early marriage, particularly when pregnancy outside marriage is highly stigmatized (UNESCO, 2018).

### **Box 6: Misconceptions and Health Risks**

"Families think early marriage protects girls' honor. But in the health center we see the consequences—early pregnancy, anemia, and girls leaving school."

- Health worker, Sudurpaschim Province

This illustrates how misconceptions about family honor drive early marriage, often resulting in serious health risks and educational discontinuation.

In Gandaki Province, adolescents described how romantic relationships are frequently formalized through marriage once they become visible within the community. Participants noted that families often feel compelled to arrange marriage quickly to avoid gossip or reputational damage. This reflects the powerful role of social surveillance and community pressure in regulating adolescent behavior. In such environments, even consensual relationships may lead to early marriage due to fear of social exclusion or moral judgment. These findings are consistent with studies showing that community norms and fear-based social regulation significantly shape adolescent decision-making, often limiting alternatives to marriage (Marcus & Page, 2016).

In Madhesh Province, particularly across the Terai region, stakeholders emphasized that family honor and social legitimacy remain deeply embedded in social structures. Community leaders explained that intimate relationships are expected to occur strictly within marriage, and deviations from this norm

are often met with strong disapproval. As a result, when adolescents engage in romantic relationships, families may arrange marriages rapidly to restore social acceptance and avoid perceived shame. This demonstrates how marriage functions as a socially sanctioned mechanism for legitimizing relationships, even when it contradicts legal standards regarding minimum age. Similar patterns have been widely documented in South Asia, where early marriage is often used to regulate sexuality and uphold family reputation (UNFPA, 2025).

In Koshi Province, teachers and health workers highlighted the role of misinformation and limited access to accurate knowledge. Without comprehensive sexuality education, adolescents frequently rely on peers or informal sources for information, which can perpetuate myths and misunderstandings. A teacher noted that students often underestimate the responsibilities and risks associated with early marriage and parenthood. This reinforces evidence that gaps in education and awareness not only increase vulnerability to early pregnancy but also contribute to the normalization of early marriage as a perceived solution (UNESCO, 2018).

These provincial insights demonstrate that early marriage is strongly influenced by misinformation and entrenched social expectations surrounding honor, legitimacy, and appropriate adolescent behavior. The fear of stigma, particularly in relation to relationships or pregnancy, often pushes families and adolescents to view marriage as the safest or most acceptable option. However, evidence consistently shows that early marriage increases health risks for adolescent girls, including higher rates of anemia, complications during pregnancy, and reduced access to education and health services (UNICEF & UNFPA, 2017; Seta, 2023).

Addressing these drivers requires a multidimensional approach that goes beyond legal enforcement. Expanding access to comprehensive sexuality education, promoting open and non-judgmental community dialogue, and challenging harmful norms around honor and legitimacy are essential. Interventions must also be culturally sensitive, ensuring that efforts to reduce stigma do not further marginalize adolescents but instead empower them and their families to make informed and health-conscious decisions. In a nutshell, the drivers of early marriage and the impact on education by province is given in the table below:

**Table 6: Drivers of early marriage related to Misconceptions About Health and Legitimacy**

| Province             | Drivers of Early Marriage  | Impact on Education   |
|----------------------|--|---|
| <b>Sudur Paschim</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Families see early marriage as protecting girls' honor</li> <li>- Fear of social stigma if romantic relationships arise</li> <li>- Limited knowledge about reproductive health</li> </ul>                         | Irregular school attendance, dropouts, interrupted learning   |
| <b>Karnali</b>       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Misconceptions about health risks and early pregnancy</li> <li>- Social pressure to maintain family reputation</li> <li>- Lack of guidance or trusted advisors</li> </ul>   | Absenteeism, school discontinuation                           |
| <b>Lumbini</b>       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Fear of gossip or community criticism</li> <li>- Belief that marriage ensures social legitimacy</li> <li>- Limited understanding of SRH (sexual and reproductive health)</li> </ul>                               | Absenteeism, dropout, interrupted studies                     |
| <b>Gandaki</b>       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Pressure to formalize relationships to avoid reputational damage</li> <li>- Families perceive marriage as restoring social acceptance</li> <li>- Adolescents lack safe spaces to discuss relationships</li> </ul> | Dropping out, irregular attendance                            |
| <b>Bagmati</b>       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Misunderstandings about reproductive health and marriage timing</li> <li>- Social expectations to preserve honor</li> <li>- Limited access to sexuality education</li> </ul>                                      | School interruptions, absenteeism                             |
| <b>Madhesh</b>       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Strong family and community emphasis on honor</li> <li>- Belief that romantic/sexual relationships must occur within marriage</li> <li>- Pressure to marry quickly to avoid shame</li> </ul>                      | High dropout among girls, disrupted schooling                 |
| <b>Koshi</b>         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Limited access to comprehensive sexuality education</li> <li>- Reliance on peers/informal sources for reproductive health knowledge</li> <li>- Fear of stigma related to relationships</li> </ul>                 | Dropping out, irregular attendance, reduced learning outcomes |

### **f. Legal Misunderstandings and Social Acceptance**

Despite Nepal's legal minimum age of marriage being 20 years, consultations revealed major gaps in legal awareness, enforcement, and social acceptance. Across provinces, participants emphasized that early marriage is often viewed not as a legal violation, but as a socially negotiable matter shaped by community norms. Social legitimacy frequently outweighs formal legal compliance, reflecting the disconnect between statutory frameworks and lived realities (FWLD, 2025).

In Koshi Province, local governance often mediates early marriage cases through informal mechanisms rather than law enforcement (Box 7). In Gandaki Province, fear of social conflict and community disapproval similarly limits reporting of early marriages. Families prioritize social cohesion over legal compliance, showing how local norms legitimize child marriage even when it violates the law (Scott et al., 2021).

**Box 7: Informal Legal Mediation**

"If children elope, families come to us. We try to settle it socially rather than go to police. People fear stigma more than legal consequences."

- Ward representative

This illustrates how social stigma and the desire for community harmony override statutory law, allowing underage marriages to persist.

*"The law of Nepal is not child friendly. Children cannot raise their voice if they face injustice." (Voice from CSO representative)*

In Lumbini and Madhesh Provinces, structural challenges weaken legal protections. Participants noted limited funding for Gender Equality, Disability, and Social Inclusion (GEDSI) programs, poor coordination between local governments and enforcement agencies, and gaps in accountability. Incomplete birth registration and missing documentation further enable underage marriages without scrutiny (UNICEF Nepal, 2024).

These insights demonstrate that early marriage is rarely a simple legal issue. Instead, it is shaped by social expectations, stigma, and community dispute resolution practices that frequently supersede statutory provisions. Addressing child marriage requires integrated approaches: improving legal literacy, enhancing institutional coordination, securing resources for enforcement, and working with communities to shift norms around honor, legitimacy, and adolescent rights. Aligning legal frameworks with social realities is critical to making statutory protections both effective and socially accepted (FWLD, 2025).

**Table 7: Drivers of early marriage related to Legal Misunderstanding and Social Acceptance**

| Province      | Drivers of Early Marriage  | Impact on Education   |
|---------------|--|---|
| Sudur Paschim | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Confusion about legal age of marriage</li> <li>- Fear of social stigma if marriage is refused</li> <li>- Informal mediation preferred over legal action</li> </ul>  | Irregular school attendance, absenteeism, potential dropout |
| Karnali       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Limited awareness of statutory law</li> <li>- Social pressure to formalize elopements</li> <li>- Prioritization of social harmony over legal enforcement</li> </ul> | Leaving school early, disrupted learning                    |

|                |  |   |
|----------------|--|---|
| <b>Lumbini</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Weak policy implementation and enforcement</li> <li>- Limited coordination between authorities</li> <li>- Families see early marriage as socially acceptable</li> </ul>                     | Absenteeism, dropout, interrupted studies                 |
| <b>Gandaki</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Fear of social conflict and community disapproval</li> <li>- Families avoid formal reporting to maintain social acceptance</li> <li>- Legal provisions often overridden by norms</li> </ul> | Dropping out, irregular attendance                        |
| <b>Bagmati</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Misunderstanding of legal consequences</li> <li>- Community practices and social norms favored over law</li> <li>- Weak enforcement at local level</li> </ul>                               | School interruptions, absenteeism                         |
| <b>Madhesh</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Weak legal enforcement and program support</li> <li>- Pressure to conform to social norms</li> <li>- Confusion over statutory rights</li> </ul>   | High dropout among girls, disrupted schooling             |
| <b>Koshi</b>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Local leaders mediate cases informally</li> <li>- Fear of social gossip outweighs legal concerns</li> <li>- Parents see early marriage as protecting reputation</li> </ul>                  | Dropping out, irregular attendance, interrupted education |

## g. Digital Influence and Accelerated Relationships

Consultations across provinces highlighted the growing role of digital communication platforms, particularly social media, in shaping adolescent relationships and, in some cases, accelerating pathways toward early and self-initiated marriage. Participants consistently noted that platforms such as Facebook and TikTok have expanded opportunities for private communication, enabling adolescents to form emotional connections rapidly, often without adequate guidance from families, schools, or community structures. In this context, digital spaces do not operate as isolated drivers but interact with existing social, emotional, and structural vulnerabilities to influence decision-making. This observation aligns with emerging global evidence suggesting that digital environments can intensify adolescent risk-taking behaviors when combined with limited supervision, weak support systems, and restrictive social norms (UNICEF, 2025; Livingstone & Third, 2017).

In Gandaki Province, teachers reported that online interactions frequently lead to romantic relationships among students, which can escalate quickly into conflict within families (See box 8). This shows how digital communication can accelerate emotional attachment

### Box 8: Digital-Accelerated Marriage

"Students start talking online and develop strong feelings quickly. When parents find out, conflict often starts at home, and sometimes families think marriage is the easiest way to resolve the situation." - Teacher

This illustrates how social media accelerates emotional attachment and triggers family pressures toward early marriage.

while simultaneously triggering social pressures that push families toward early marriage as a conflict-resolution mechanism.

Similar dynamics were observed in Koshi Province, where youth facilitators described cases of adolescents eloping after relationships formed through social media. These relationships often develop within geographically proximate communities but are facilitated and intensified through online interaction. A facilitator noted, "Friends sometimes encourage these relationships, and when videos or photos are shared online, the pressure increases. Some feel they must prove their relationship publicly." This highlights the role of peer influence and digital visibility in reinforcing relational commitments, where online validation can translate into real-world decisions such as elopement or marriage. Research shows that social media can amplify peer norms and create perceived expectations for public affirmation of relationships, particularly among adolescents (Odgers & Jensen, 2020).

In Madhesh Province, school stakeholders reported an increase in self-initiated marriages among grades 8-10 students due to unsupervised online interactions. Teachers emphasized that these relationships often develop beyond the awareness of parents and schools, particularly where adolescents have unsupervised access to mobile phones. Participants in Lumbini Province further highlighted how social media visibility can create a sense of obligation to formalize relationships. A community facilitator explained, "When a relationship becomes visible on social media, families sometimes feel there is no option but marriage." This reflects how digital exposure intersects with entrenched norms around honor and legitimacy, reinforcing the expectation that publicly acknowledged relationships must be legitimized through marriage.

In Bagmati Province, adolescents themselves described how digital platforms enable connections beyond immediate social circles, increasing opportunities for relationship formation. While many interactions remain benign, some participants acknowledged that emotional attachment can develop quickly without consideration of long-term consequences. One participant reflected, "Online we talk freely, but sometimes we do not think about what will happen later." Additionally, informants pointed to extreme manifestations of social control in certain contexts, including cases where relationships that cross social or cultural boundaries (e.g., hypergamous or hypogamous unions) lead to severe social sanctions, particularly against girls. In such situations, girls may face social exclusion, violence, or even legal vulnerability due to lack of documentation or recognition of their rights. These dynamics underscore how digital relationships intersect with deeply entrenched gender norms and power hierarchies.

In Sudurpaschim Province, stakeholders emphasized that limited parental familiarity with digital platforms increases adolescents' vulnerability (see box 9). This gap in digital literacy between generations reduces the capacity of families to guide or monitor adolescents' online interactions effectively.

**Box 9: Parental Digital Literacy Gap**

"Many parents are not familiar with these platforms, so they do not know how quickly relationships can develop there." - Youth Worker

This shows how gaps in parental understanding of digital platforms reduce families' ability to guide or monitor adolescents' online interactions effectively.

Taken together, these provincial narratives suggest that digital platforms are not primary causes of child marriage but act as accelerators within pre-existing conditions of vulnerability. When combined with emotional insecurity, limited parental guidance, educational discontinuity, and strong socio-cultural expectations, online interactions can intensify emotional bonding and shorten the decision-making process leading to early marriage. Digital environments amplify peer visibility, normalize rapid relationship progression, and create social pressure for public validation, which may translate into commitments such as elopement or marriage.

These findings are consistent with global research indicating that digital exposure, in the absence of adequate support systems, can heighten adolescents' susceptibility to impulsive decision-making and social pressure (UNICEF, 2025; Odgers & Jensen, 2020). Therefore, addressing digitally influenced early marriage requires integrated interventions that go beyond restricting access to technology. Strengthening digital literacy among both adolescents and parents, promoting open communication within families, and establishing safe spaces, such as school-based counseling and youth support platforms, are essential.

**Table 7: Drivers of early marriage related to Legal Misunderstanding and Social Acceptance**

| Province             | Drivers of Early Marriage   | Impact on Education   |
|----------------------|---|---|
| <b>Sudur Paschim</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Limited parental supervision of digital platforms</li> <li>- Rapid formation of emotional attachments online</li> <li>- Pressure to formalize relationships</li> </ul>                     | Irregular school attendance, absenteeism, potential dropout |
| <b>Karnali</b>       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Adolescents using social media without guidance</li> <li>- Emotional bonds formed quickly online</li> <li>- Families sometimes see marriage as a resolution to online conflicts</li> </ul> | Dropping out, interrupted learning                          |

|                |  |   |
|----------------|--|---|
| <b>Lumbini</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Increased mobile phone use in semi-urban areas</li> <li>- Social pressure from publicly visible online relationships</li> <li>- Rapid escalation of romantic involvement</li> </ul>   | Absenteeism, dropout, school discontinuation                          |
| <b>Gandaki</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Online interactions leading to romantic relationships</li> <li>- Parents perceive marriage as solution to conflicts arising from online bonds</li> <li>- Adolescents form strong attachments quickly</li> </ul>                         | Dropping out, irregular attendance, disrupted education               |
| <b>Bagmati</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Easy connection with peers outside immediate community via social media</li> <li>- Emotional attachment develops without parental knowledge</li> <li>- Cultural/honor pressures in cases of hypergamous/hypogamous marriages</li> </ul> | School interruptions, absenteeism, risk of social/legal victimization |
| <b>Madhesh</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Unsupervised access to mobile phones</li> <li>- Early relationships among students in grades 8-10</li> <li>- Pressure to formalize online relationships quickly</li> </ul>  | Dropout risk, disrupted studies, reduced learning opportunities       |
| <b>Koshi</b>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Adolescents eloping after online relationships</li> <li>- Peer pressure and online visibility accelerate decisions</li> <li>- Lack of digital literacy and parental guidance</li> </ul>   | Dropping out, irregular attendance, interrupted education             |

## h. Emotional Needs and Adolescent Agency

Field evidence from Nepal shows that not all early marriages are externally imposed; some adolescents actively express a desire for autonomy, emotional connection, or independence. However, these choices are rarely made in genuinely free contexts. Poverty, gender inequality, limited schooling opportunities, and lack of psychosocial support constrain adolescent agency.

### Box 10: Constrained Choice - Koshi Province

"They say it is their decision. But when options are limited, there is no school support, no counseling, no safe space, then how free is that decision?" -Youth Facilitator

This highlights that adolescent agency often exists within constrained contexts where structural and social limitations shape 'choices' toward early marriage

Across provinces, early marriage decisions are influenced by intersecting factors: emotional insecurity, economic pressures, misconceptions about health and legitimacy, weak legal enforcement, limited sexual and reproductive health knowledge, digital influences, and entrenched gender norms. In Sudurpaschim Province, girls reported marrying to escape household conflict or neglect, but

many experienced psychological distress and regret afterward. In Gandaki and Madhesh Provinces, adolescents described marriage as a pathway to emotional security or social recognition, showing that self-initiated marriages often respond to psychosocial vulnerabilities rather than full freedom of choice.

These findings illustrate that child marriage in Nepal is both a structural and psychosocial phenomenon (See box 10). Poverty and social norms remain dominant drivers, but emotional vulnerability, desire for protection, and a sense of belonging significantly shape adolescent decisions. National data support this: over one-third of women aged 20-24 was married before 18, despite legal prohibitions (NDHS, 2022).

Ultimately, adolescents do exercise agency, but often within unequal and limited contexts, where structural, social, and emotional pressures intersect, perpetuating cycles of school dropout, health risks, and psychosocial challenges. Prevention strategies must therefore combine legal enforcement with interventions (Seta, 2023; UNICEF, 2025) that strengthen education, economic support, psychosocial services, and community-level gender norm transformation.

### **i. Impact of Child Marriage on Health, Education, and Psychosocial Impacts**

This study tried to assess the impact of child marriage on health, education, and psychosocial status. The province specific impact of child marriage has been given in the aforesaid tables. Here, the combined impact of child marriage on health, education, and psychosocial impacts have been presented. As the provincial evidence from Nepal underscores the wide-ranging consequences of early marriage, this study shows the impact of child marriage on affecting health, education, psychosocial well-being, and protection outcomes. Health impacts are among the most immediate and severe. In Sudurpaschim Province, maternal health nurses such as Ms. Laxmi reported frequent cases of early pregnancy among adolescent girls, often accompanied by anemia, obstetric complications, and limited knowledge of reproductive health. As she explained during consultations, *"Many girls come to the health post already pregnant. They are physically weak and often do not understand how to take care of themselves during pregnancy."* Similarly, stakeholders in Madhesh Province highlighted adolescents' vulnerability due to early pregnancy and inadequate supervision, reflecting both physiological risks and systemic gaps in health education (Seta, 2023; UNICEF, 2024). These findings are consistent with global evidence showing that child marriage significantly increases maternal and infant morbidity and mortality (UNICEF & UNFPA, 2017).

Educational disruption is another pervasive consequence. Provincial monitoring and interviews indicate that school dropout typically occurs between grades 7 and 10, with Koshi Province, Gandaki Province, and Lumbini Province reporting the highest incidence. Teachers participating in consultations noted that early engagement or marriage often coincides with declining attendance and eventual withdrawal from school. In Dang District, observations from Women's Rehabilitation Centre (WOREC) revealed that adolescents frequently leave school after early marriage or school transfers, highlighting the interplay between familial expectations, social pressures, and structural barriers to continued education. A local facilitator explained, *"Even when girls want to study, it becomes difficult after marriage because household responsibilities and pregnancy come first."* Teachers and community leaders further emphasized that returning to school after marriage is rare due to stigma and family expectations (NDHS, 2022; UNICEF, 2024).

Early marriage also has profound psychosocial implications. Adolescents frequently report feelings of isolation, anxiety, depression, and trauma, particularly when marriages fail or involve conflict with spouses or in-laws. In Sudurpaschim Province and Koshi Province, FGDs and KIs highlighted cases where emotional crises emerged from abrupt transitions into adult roles, early parenthood, or marital separation. One youth facilitator described a case where a young bride, married soon after leaving school, struggled to adapt to household expectations and eventually returned to her parents' home experiencing severe emotional distress. These experiences are compounded by the limited availability of counseling services and youth-friendly support systems in many communities. Such psychosocial challenges align with international research linking child marriage to long-term mental health vulnerabilities, including depression and reduced resilience (Seta, 2023).

Moreover, early marriage increases adolescents' exposure to abuse and exploitation. In Koshi Province, local protection officers such as Ms. Ritu noted that young brides often face domestic violence or abandonment, with limited ability to seek recourse due to financial dependency and social pressures. As she noted, *"Many girls tolerate violence because they feel they have nowhere else to go."* Such experiences reflect how child marriage amplifies vulnerability, perpetuating cycles of gender-based violence and social marginalization. Collectively, provincial evidence illustrates that early marriage in Nepal has interlinked consequences: it jeopardizes physical health, disrupts educational trajectories, exacerbates psychosocial stress, and heightens exposure to abuse. These outcomes reinforce national and global findings that child marriage not only undermines individual development but also perpetuates intergenerational cycles of poverty, inequality, and diminished human capital (UNICEF, 2024; UNICEF & UNFPA, 2017).

# OBLIGATORY AGENCY FOR MARRIAGE

This study shows that child marriage in Nepal often becomes obligatory due to multiple, overlapping pressures. These pressures were identified through interviews, KIs, FGDs, and virtual consultations across provinces. The main dimensions influencing early marriage decisions are:

## a. Cultural Beliefs

Religious and traditional norms continue to strongly influence early marriage decisions. In Sudurpaschim Province, both adolescents and parents reported that fear of violating customs motivates early marriage. One stakeholder explained, "Families believe that marrying daughters early brings blessings and protects family honor." Similarly, in Kapilvastu, Lumbini Province, some communities view early marriage as a religious obligation, reinforcing parental decisions even when legal restrictions exist. These examples highlight that cultural and spiritual imperatives are deeply intertwined with family honor and social cohesion, making early marriage appear necessary and socially legitimate. Global evidence supports this, showing that religious and cultural expectations can legitimize early unions and complicate legal enforcement (UNICEF & UNFPA, 2017; Seta, 2023). Understanding the role of religion is crucial for designing context-sensitive interventions that respect cultural beliefs while promoting the rights, health, and education of adolescents.

## b. Personal Choice

Adolescents sometimes appear to actively choose early marriage; however, this choice is often shaped and limited by broader social, economic, and structural conditions. In many cases, what is seen as a "personal decision" reflects constrained agency rather than full autonomy.

In most of the provinces, teachers reported that digital interactions are accelerating romantic relationships among adolescents, leading to self-initiated marriages at an early age. One teacher noted that students often interpret online expressions of affection as serious commitments, even when they are not emotionally prepared. This shows how digital spaces are influencing young people's understanding of relationships and decisions.

At the same time, the idea of "choice" needs careful reflection. When adolescents lack supportive school environments, counseling services, and safe spaces, their ability to make informed and independent decisions is limited. As a result, early marriage may appear as a personal choice, but it is often shaped by the

absence of alternatives and support systems (UNICEF, 2025; Seta, 2023). Therefore, this remains an important area for discussion, whether early marriage is truly a personal choice of children, or a decision influenced by surrounding conditions where others play a significant role, and where consequences are often not fully understood by adolescents.

### **c. Parental Choice**

Parents play a central role in driving early marriage, often motivated by economic pressures, social expectations, or household management concerns. In Madhesh and Lumbini Provinces, parents sometimes push daughters into early marriage due to poverty or dowry obligations. As Ram Sharan from Dalit Samajik Bikas observed, "Girls often leave school early because families cannot afford education and believe marriage will secure their future."

In Karnali Province, patriarchal norms reinforce parental authority, leaving adolescents little power to resist marriage even when they wish to continue schooling. Across provinces, parental influence interacts with economic vulnerability and social expectations, showing that early marriage is rarely the result of a single factor.

### **d. Societal Choice**

Communities and social structures reinforce early marriage through informal mechanisms and social expectations. In Koshi and Gandaki Provinces, informal community mediation often resolves cases of underage marriage, prioritizing social harmony over legal compliance: "These interventions focus on maintaining neighborhood peace rather than reporting to authorities." In Madhesh Province, social stigma and family honor pressures accelerate adolescent unions, sometimes even when adolescents or parents are hesitant. These examples illustrate that societal norms, peer pressures, and community expectations converge with parental and adolescent decision-making, shaping complex pathways to early marriage (NDHS, 2022; UNICEF & FWLD, 2025).

Child marriage in Nepal rarely results from a single cause. Religious and cultural obligations, adolescent aspirations, parental decisions, and societal expectations intersect, creating layered pressures with limited adolescent autonomy. Even when adolescents exercise agency, their choices are shaped by structural vulnerabilities, economic insecurity, gender norms, and social expectations. Addressing child marriage requires multi-dimensional, context-sensitive interventions, including legal enforcement, family and community engagement, adolescent empowerment, and improved access to education and psychosocial support. Only such strategies can meaningfully expand adolescent agency and reduce early and self-initiated marriages while safeguarding health, education, and well-being.

# Effects of Child Marriage

Impact is the noticeable change of child marriage on health, education, and psychosocial status. But the effect is the general change that can bring about. In the subsequent sections and the tables above, the impact of child marriage has been discussed. In this section, the effect of child marriage has been portrayed which was identified during the field work. The research reveals that the consequences of child marriage extend far beyond early union itself. Participants consistently emphasized that early marriage disrupts adolescents' health, education, psychosocial well-being, and long-term life trajectories, while also reinforcing broader cycles of poverty and gender inequality. These lived realities strongly align with national and global evidence (UNICEF, 2024; Seta, 2023).

## a. Health-Related Effects

Across provinces, health workers and local stakeholders reported that early pregnancy is one of the most immediate and visible consequences of child marriage. In Sudurpaschim Province, a maternal health nurse (Ms. Laxmi) explained: "Most of our young mothers are under 18. They come with anemia, complications during delivery, and very low awareness about reproductive health." Early pregnancy significantly increases the risk of maternal complications, obstructed labor, obstetric fistula, maternal mortality, and infant mortality. Health officials noted that adolescent mothers are often physically unprepared for childbirth, which puts both mother and child at risk. These findings are consistent with global research indicating that early marriage heightens vulnerability to reproductive health complications, partner violence, and HIV infection (UNICEF, 2024).

Mental health concerns were also repeatedly raised during FGDs. Married adolescent girls described feelings of anxiety, regret, and emotional isolation. In Koshi Province, a 17-year-old participant (Anita) shared, "After marriage, I felt alone. I had to adjust to a new home, new responsibilities. I missed my friends and school." Local psychosocial counselors reported increasing cases of depression and trauma among young brides, particularly when marriages involved conflict or violence. Stakeholders emphasized that mental health challenges are often hidden and untreated due to stigma and lack of services, echoing global evidence linking child marriage with long-term psychological distress (Seta, 2023; UNICEF, 2024).

## **b. Education-Related Effects**

Educational disruption emerged as the most immediate and widely observed consequence of child marriage. Teachers across all provinces reported that once students marry, permanent dropout becomes highly likely.

In Koshi Province, a secondary school teacher (Mr. Suresh) stated, "Married adolescents rarely return. Even if they want to, household responsibilities and pregnancy make it impossible."

Participants also noted irregular attendance prior to dropout. Students preparing for marriage often begin missing classes, repeating grades, or showing declining academic performance. In Gandaki Province, teachers observed that early marriages were more frequent among students in Grade 6 and 7, particularly where academic engagement was already weak. One teacher remarked: "Counseling alone is not enough. Without a supportive home environment, students cannot continue." National and global evidence confirms that married girls are significantly more likely to be out of school compared to unmarried peers (UNICEF, 2024). The loss of education not only limits immediate academic progression but also restricts lifelong learning opportunities, employability, and leadership potential.

## **c. Psychosocial and Emotional Impacts**

The study revealed that child marriage often leads to emotional isolation and diminished self-esteem. Adolescents described abrupt transitions into adult responsibilities, managing households, caregiving, and navigating marital relationships, without adequate emotional maturity or support. In Sudurpaschim, separated adolescent couples reported psychological stress and regret following early unions. A youth facilitator (KII) explained: "When marriages fail, the girl suffers more. She faces stigma, financial dependency, and emotional breakdown." Some participants described experiencing domestic violence or controlling behaviors from spouses or in-laws. Early marriage thus increases vulnerability to abuse, neglect, and psychosocial trauma. Research shows that child marriage is associated with depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and long-term resilience deficits, with potential intergenerational impacts on children born into such unions (Seta, 2023; UNICEF, 2024). Field narratives strongly reinforced these findings.

## **d. Increased Risk of Abuse and Exploitation**

Stakeholders in Koshi Province highlighted cases where early marriages resulted in domestic violence or abandonment. Without economic independence or social protection, adolescent girls are often unable to leave abusive situations.

A local protection officer (Ms. Ritu) stated, "Young brides have very little bargaining power. They are financially dependent and socially pressured to remain silent."

FGD participants also shared that when early marriages dissolve, girls frequently return to their parental homes with limited options, facing social stigma and psychological distress. These realities illustrate how early marriage heightens vulnerability to gender-based violence and exploitation.

### **e. Broader Societal Effects**

Beyond individual consequences, child marriage perpetuates cycles of poverty and gender inequality at the community level. In Gandaki Province, stakeholders described how early marriages driven by poverty, family conflict, or social media influence often result in intergenerational disadvantage. When girls leave school early and enter motherhood prematurely, their economic opportunities shrink, reinforcing household poverty. This, in turn, increases the likelihood that their own children may face similar vulnerabilities. Community leaders acknowledged that child marriage undermines broader social development goals, including educational attainment, health equity, and gender justice. Nationally, these patterns contribute to weakened human capital and hinder Nepal's progress toward Sustainable Development Goals related to education, health, and gender equality (UNICEF, 2024).



# Measures to Control and Prevent Child Marriage in Nepal

Nepal has established a clear legal framework to prevent child marriage. The Constitution of Nepal and the National Civil Code set the minimum legal age of marriage at 20 years for both men and women. Despite this strong legal provision, enforcement remains inconsistent across the country. Limited birth registration, weak monitoring systems, and the frequent reliance on informal community mediation often undermine the effectiveness of these laws (UNICEF & FWLD, 2025). Evidence suggests that legal reforms alone do not substantially reduce child marriage unless they are supported by effective implementation mechanisms, accountability structures, and sustained public awareness efforts (UNICEF & UNFPA, 2017).

## a. Strengthening the existing institutions

Each school has child club and each Palika has child development network. Strengthening these institutional mechanisms at the local level is essential to control self-initiated child marriage. Participants across provinces emphasized the importance of empowering ward-level child protection committees, improving coordination between local governments, police, and social service agencies, and ensuring systematic birth registration to verify age at marriage. Legal literacy campaigns can also play a key role in helping adolescents and families understand both their rights and the legal consequences of underage marriage. At the same time, enforcement strategies must be accompanied by supportive services, such as counseling, protection mechanisms, and access to education, to avoid further marginalizing adolescents already affected by early marriage (UNICEF, 2024).

## b. Enforcing the legal provisions

Provincial consultations reveal several practical challenges that affect the enforcement of these laws. In Koshi Province, ward-level child protection committees often attempt to resolve child marriage cases informally rather than through legal channels. As one ward representative (Mr. Bikash) explained, *"In many cases, families are more afraid of social stigma than legal punishment, so issues are settled quietly within the community."* In Gandaki Province, stakeholders noted that community members are sometimes reluctant to formally report early marriage cases because they fear creating conflict within the community or being held responsible for social disputes. Similarly, in Madhesh Province and Lumbini Province, participants highlighted weak policy

implementation and limited dedicated budgets for Gender Equality, Disability, and Social Inclusion (GEDSI) programs. These gaps constrain the capacity of local governments to implement prevention initiatives effectively.

These findings suggest that while Nepal has a strong legal foundation to address child marriage, but lag enforcement systems, improved institutional coordination, and adequate financial and technical resources are essential to translate legal provisions into meaningful protection for adolescents.

### **c. Expanding Access to Quality Education and Life Skills**

National Education is consistently identified as the most protective factor against child marriage. National data indicate that girls with secondary education are significantly less likely to marry before the age of 18 compared to those with little or no schooling (UNICEF & UNFPA, 2017; NDHS, 2022). Globally, each additional year of schooling reduces the likelihood of early marriage, highlighting the critical role of sustained educational participation for adolescent girls (UNICEF, 2024). Ensuring access to quality education, gender-responsive pedagogy, and adolescent-friendly reproductive health information is therefore essential for preventing child marriage. Life skills education that enhances critical thinking, communication, and negotiation capacity enables adolescents to make informed decisions about relationships, education, and marriage. Evidence also suggests that school retention programs—such as scholarships, safe learning environments, transportation support, and flexible re-enrollment policies, are crucial for preventing permanent dropout among married or pregnant adolescents (UNICEF, 2024).

### **d. Engaging and involving parents for dialogue and discourse**

Field consultations further highlight that the relationship between education and child marriage is shaped by local social norms, economic conditions, and accessibility of schools across provinces. Teachers and community stakeholders in Gandaki Province emphasized that school-based counseling programs are valuable but insufficient in isolation. Without supportive family environments and parental engagement, adolescents often face pressure to leave school and marry early. Similarly, stakeholders in Koshi Province reported that while awareness about the harms of child marriage has increased, parental attitudes and household decision-making continue to strongly influence girls' educational continuity. This discussion demands for engaged and involved dialogue among the social elite, teachers, parents, peoples' representatives, political parties, and students at least once in a month to address the case of potential child marriage.

## **e. Reducing infrastructural barriers**

In Madhesh and Lumbini Provinces, structural barriers remain significant. Participants reported that girls frequently drop out between grades 7 and 10 due to long travel distances to secondary schools, limited transportation options, safety concerns, and persistent perceptions among families that investing in girls' education yields limited economic returns. These factors combine with economic vulnerability to accelerate early marriage decisions. In Karnali Province, geographic isolation and deeply rooted traditional gender norms further restrict girls' mobility and participation in education. Community respondents noted that domestic responsibilities and expectations of early marriage often limit girls' opportunities to continue schooling beyond the basic level. In Sudurpashchim Province, migration dynamics and entrenched patriarchal norms further influence girls' educational trajectories. Stakeholders noted that when male household members migrate for labor, adolescent girls often assume increased domestic responsibilities, which contributes to irregular school attendance and eventual dropout. In some communities, early marriage is still perceived as a socially acceptable pathway once girls leave school, particularly in economically marginalized households.

## **f. Introducing integrated support system for girls**

Across provinces, it was underscored that improving girls' education requires more than expanding school infrastructure alone. Integrated strategies that combine school retention support, community engagement, parental awareness, gender-transformative programming, and adolescent empowerment initiatives are necessary to ensure that education functions as an effective protective factor against child marriage.

Community-based child clubs, adolescent groups, and peer networks serve as important protective platforms for preventing child marriage. These spaces create opportunities for dialogue, peer learning, awareness-building, and emotional support among adolescents. Evidence indicates that adolescent empowerment initiatives particularly those combining life skills development with parental and community engagement can significantly reduce the likelihood of early marriage (UNICEF & UNFPA, 2017). Psychosocial counseling and adolescent-friendly mental health services are also critical, particularly for young people experiencing family conflict, social pressure, or emotional vulnerability related to relationships and future uncertainty. Strengthening referral systems between schools, health facilities, and local governments can help ensure that adolescents facing such risks receive timely counseling, protection services, and appropriate guidance.

Insights from provincial consultations highlight the importance of locally responsive support mechanisms: For example,

- ▶ Koshi and Gandaki Provinces: Participants emphasized that child clubs, adolescent groups, and peer networks play a valuable role in facilitating open dialogue, building awareness about the risks of early marriage, and providing emotional support among peers. These platforms help adolescents share experiences and develop confidence to discuss sensitive issues.
- ▶ Madhesh Province: Stakeholders reported that adolescents living in households where parents have migrated for labor often face increased emotional isolation and reduced supervision, making them more vulnerable to early relationships and marriage pressures. Community mentorship programs and youth engagement initiatives were identified as effective approaches to providing guidance and strengthening protective support networks.
- ▶ Sudurpashchim Province: Participants highlighted the importance of accessible counseling services and effective referral systems to address emotional distress among adolescents, particularly those who experience family pressure or challenges following early marriage. Strengthening coordination between schools, health posts, and local child protection mechanisms was seen as essential for providing timely psychosocial support and preventing long-term psychological impacts.

Overall, strengthening adolescent support systems requires integrated efforts that combine peer engagement platforms, counseling services, parental involvement, and effective referral pathways to ensure that vulnerable adolescents receive the guidance and protection necessary to make informed life choices.

### **g. Transforming Socio-Cultural Norms**

Child marriage in Nepal is closely linked to deeply entrenched gender norms, perceptions of honor, and social expectations around adulthood. Sustainable prevention requires long-term transformation of these norms through community dialogue, engagement with religious and traditional leaders, and the active inclusion of men and boys in gender equality initiatives (UNICEF, 2024). Research shows that community-led reflection and storytelling can shift attitudes by humanizing the consequences of early marriage. Sharing the lived experiences of adolescents who married early, particularly stories that illustrate disrupted education, health complications, and psychosocial distress, helps challenge romanticized perceptions of early unions and encourages collective accountability (UNICEF & UNFPA, 2017).

## **h. Addressing local value systems of child marriage consensually**

Provincial consultations demonstrate how local socio-cultural norms reinforce early marriage practices. In Kapilvastu, Lumbini Province, religious beliefs and traditional practices continue to encourage early marriage, often framing it as a moral or protective duty. In Madhesh Province, community pressure combined with entrenched dowry norms reinforces early marriage as a socially acceptable pathway, often prioritizing marriage arrangements over girls' education. In Karnali Province, patriarchal structures and limited legal awareness restrict adolescents' ability to resist parental decisions, limiting girls' voice in choices about education, marriage, and future opportunities.

Evidence suggests that norm-change initiatives are most effective when they are continuous, participatory, and locally contextualized, combining economic support, education, and community engagement rather than relying solely on awareness campaigns (UNICEF, 2024). Such holistic approaches can create environments where adolescents are empowered to make informed decisions and are protected from early and coerced marriage. Participatory discussions can be made between and among potential students of child marriage, those who unfortunately met child marriage, legal personalities, social elites, parents, and obviously teachers.



# Conclusion

Ending child marriage in line with its drivers demands a decisive shift from fragmented, project-based responses to a coherent and nationally coordinated strategy. Although the legal minimum age of marriage is clearly established, national survey data show that child marriage remains prevalent, particularly among economically disadvantaged, geographically remote, and socially marginalized communities (NDHS, 2022). This gap between law and lived reality underscores the need for stronger implementation, accountability, and systemic reform.

Evidence from both global and national studies confirms that sustainable reduction in child marriage occurs only when structural inequalities such as poverty, gender discrimination, limited educational access, and weak social protection, are addressed alongside adolescent empowerment and transformation of harmful social norms. Legal enforcement alone is insufficient without complementary investments in education retention, adolescent health services, economic strengthening of vulnerable households, and community-level norm change.

This national assessment reaffirms that child marriage in Nepal is a multidimensional issue shaped by economic hardship, educational discontinuity, emotional insecurity, family conflict, entrenched gender norms, and emerging influences such as digital media exposure. To mention it categorically, child marriage has been continuing in Nepal because (a) parents feel their obligation to marry their children before they take decision (b) parents also fear that cross marriage takes their children out of the culturally attuned comfort zone (c) they feel that protection of girl's womb requires early marriage (d) cultural socialization systems also makes children for early sex for marriage (e) romantic materials available in digital world make children sexually curious to have early marriage (f) instinctual, living habits etc also prepares children for early marriage for sex as pre-marriage sex is considered as taboo in Nepal. The consequences of any of the causes for early marriage are equally far-reaching, disrupting education, increasing maternal and reproductive health risks, intensifying psychosocial distress, and perpetuating intergenerational cycles of poverty and inequality. Therefore, preventing self-initiated and parent enforced child marriage must be positioned not merely as a protection concern but as a national development priority. A comprehensive and context-responsive approach is required, one that integrates:

- ▶ Stronger enforcement of child protection laws and improved birth registration systems
- ▶ Quality, inclusive, and gender-responsive education with re-enrollment opportunities
- ▶ Social protection and economic empowerment initiatives targeting vulnerable families
- ▶ Accessible psychosocial and adolescent-friendly health services
- ▶ Community mobilization and sustained engagement to transform harmful norms
- ▶ Meaningful participation of adolescents, especially girls, in decision-making processes
- ▶ Driver specific measures with locally responsive support systems to the parents and their children
- ▶ Monthly dialogue between students, parents and teachers to address the tell-told issues associated with self-initiated child marriage

Hence, eliminating child marriage is not merely a legal or protection challenge, it is a national development imperative. Sustainable progress depends on political commitment, adequate resourcing, multisectoral coordination, and long-term engagement with families, communities, and adolescents themselves. Only by addressing the root structural, social, and psychosocial drivers can Nepal ensure that all children transition safely into adulthood with their rights, education, health, and dignity fully protected.

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