GIRL CHILD MARRIAGE IN NEPAL:
ITS PREVALENCE AND CORRELATES

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Introduction

Child marriage has existed from time immemorable in Nepal. Until about 25-30 years ago, it was common to hear stories of children as small as 6 or 8 years old having already been married in matches arranged by parents. Growing children were told by their elders that they had already been married. They had no other choice but to accept each other as spouses and begin to cohabit when they came of age. Over time, however, marriages among children under 10 years of age have largely been eradicated. As of 1971, the last time the national census collected data on marriage among children under 10 years of age, only 2.4% of children in the 6-9 age group were reported to have been formally married (CBS 1995:173).

A 1962 law set the minimum marriage ages of 14 years for females and 18 years for males. A later revision changed the minimum ages to 16 and 18 years respectively, with parental consent. Without parental consent, the minimum ages are now 18 for females and 21 for males (Banister and Thapa 1981). The law has most probably helped in increasing the age of marriages. A lack of universal birth and marriage registrations remains, however.

The 1991 national census showed that the average age of marriage for girls is about 18 and for males about 21 (CBS 1995:181). This suggests that a large proportion of female marriages is still taking place under 18 years of age. Nevertheless, significant changes have taken place over the years. Whereas in 1961 nearly 25% of female children in the age group 10-14 were married, as of 1991 it was only about 7% (CBS 1995:173). This implies that over the thirty years period, girl child marriage in the 10-14 years-old population has been reduced by more than twice the 1991 level.

The 7% represents over 82,000 children married before they reach the age of 15. Further the 7% is a national average. It, therefore, conceals both the low and high variations. How prevalent is the girl child marriage in the different parts of Nepal? Second, what are the main socioeconomic and

cultural correlates of the girl child marriage? These two questions are examined in this paper using most recent district-level data.

Age at Marriage and Ethnicity

Age at marriage is generally known to be positively associated with socioeconomic development. Besides development, ethnicity has also been found to be an important factor affecting the timing of family formation and entry into motherhood. Ethnic group identification represents a sub-system within a society and reflects variations in institutional arrangements concerning the "starting" pattern of reproduction. Even in a highly industrialized and urbanized society as the United States, ethnic differentials remain important in all the processes of family formation, including the timing of marriage (Kobrin and Goldscheider 1978).

Similarly, studies on several Asian countries with diverse socioeconomic conditions have found that the ethnicity factor significantly affects the timing of marriage and the time of first birth, independent of socioeconomic factors (Hirschman 1985; Hirschman and Rindfuss 1980, 1982; Rindfuss and Hirschman 1984; Rindfuss, Parnell and Hirschman 1983). Congruent with these findings, the ethnic factor has been found to be a major determinant of the timing of family formation in Nepal as well (Thapa 1989).

The previous research on Nepal focused on individual-level data from the mid-1970s. More recently, Thapa (1996) examined the role of ethnicity in variations in female age of marriage with macro-level data from the 75 districts of Nepal. The analysis, which included female marriages at all ages, showed that ethnicity is the major factor affecting age of marriage in Nepal.

In this paper, we focus on girl child marriage. In many respects, this paper resembles a previous paper by the author (Thapa 1996) which examined age of marriage among all ages. The main hypothesis examined is that the district-level variations in the age of girl child marriage are determined principally by ethnicity, independent of socioeconomic factors. It is surmised, therefore, that the district-level variations are not randomly distributed among sub-populations but differentiated by ethnic characteristics in the districts.

Data and Methodology

Girl child marriage is measured as the percentage of females in the age group 10-14 married as of the time of census. The data are from the 1991 census (CBS 1993).

Ethnic group membership, the main explanatory variable, is defined by self-identification. Although surveys have collected information on

ethnicity, the 1991 census was the first census to collect data on ethnicity for the country.

Nepal's population is an ethnic mosaic, with at least 60 ethnic groups recorded in the census (Thapa 1995a). The 60 groups include those based on the Hindu caste system and religion also. Each may, however, be considered an ethnic group in that it represents a sub-system of institutional arrangements, values and norms. While many of the groups tend to be concentrated in certain ecological regions, several of the groups are scattered throughout the country. Some ethnographic information on many of these groups has been reported by Bista (1972) and Gautam and Thapa-Magar (1994).

The "control variable" in this analysis is the level of development in each district. Development is measured by the "human development index" or HDI. HDI is a measure proposed by the UNDP (1990) which comprises three components: expectation of life at birth (longevity), literacy (knowledge), and a modified measure of per capita income (resource access). The index values for each dimension are expressed in terms of the relative distances between the lowest and highest observed values on each indicator, ranging from 0 to 1.

The values for each of the three components and the composite index (HDI) for the 75 districts are given in Thapa (1995b). HDI is highly correlated with many other indicators of socioeconomic development, such as communication, roads, urbanization, health services utilization, and population growth (Thapa 1995b). This implies, therefore, that the HDI is also a proxy for many other dimensions of development.

The main techniques of data analysis used are correlation coefficients and multiple regression. The unit of analysis is district, not individuals. In this sense, it is "ecological" research.

Results

Table 1 presents prevalence of girl child marriage among 10-14 years-old females in the 75 districts of Nepal. In 37 districts the prevalence of girls married is low, less than 5%. In another 19 districts it ranges from 5% to 7%. In contrast, in seven districts the marriages range from 11% to 20%. Furthermore, in four districts the percentage is as high as 27%. Girl child marriage thus is especially high in 11 of the 75 districts. These 11 districts, representing 26% of the total population of Nepal, lie in the Terai region.

Table 1: Pecentage of Girls Married among Population 10-14 Years of Age, 75 Districts, Nepal, 1991

District	%	District	%
Terhathum	1.3	Darchula	5.0
Dhankuta	1.4	Nuwakot	5.0
Taplejung	1.7	Rukum	5.1
Panchthar	1.7	Sindhupalchok	5.2
Ilam	1.9	Tanahu	5.3
Sankhuwasabha	1.9	Achham	5.4
Mustang	2.0	Kanchanpur	5.5
Kathmandu	2.2	Doti	5.6
Udayapur	2.3	Dailekh	5.8
Sindhuli	2.3	Humla	5.8
Bhojpur	2.3	Mugu	5.9
Lalitpur	2.4	Kailali	6.0
Okhaldhunga	2.4	Pyuthan	6.2
Jhapa	2.4	Dhading	6.2
Khotang	2.5	Bajhang	6.4
Ramechhap	2.6	Arghakhanchi	6.6
Solukhumbu	2.8	Palpa	6.7
Dolpa	3.0	Baitadi	6.9
Rolpa	3.1	Baglung	7.0
Bhaktapur	3.1	Dadeldhura	7.2
Dolakha	3.2	Bardiya	7.4
Gorkha	3.2	Jajarkot	7.8
Manang	3.2	Myagdi	8.6
Morang	3.3	Kalikot	9.0
Sunsari	3.4	Jumla	9.9
Salyan	3.4	Sarlahi	10.1
Surkhet	3.4	Saptari	11.9
Parbat	3.5	Nawalparasi	12.0
Makwanpur	3.7	Banke	13.4
Lamjung	3.8	Mahottari	13.8
Gulmi	3.9	Dhanusa	14.8
Dang	4.0	Siraha	19.2
Kaski	4.2	Rautahat	19.9
Syangja	4.3	Rupandehi	20.9
Kavrepalanchok	4.3	Bara	21.6
Bajura	4.7	Parsa	26.3
Rasuwa	4.8	Kapilbastu	26.6
Chitawan	5.0	**All Nepal**	**7.3**

Note: The districts are arranged in ascending order according to the percentages (with more exact values than shown in the table).
Source: CBS (1993).

Table 2 presents the correlation coefficients between the various ethnic groups and the prevalence of girl child marriage in the 75 districts. In the table two types of correlations are presented. The first column shows simple correlation or Pearson r, which is a linear correlation between each ethnic group and the prevalence of girl child marriage. The second column, on the other hand, refers to the linear correlation after controlling for the possible effects of development (that is, the human development index). Thus while the first column shows the degree of "gross" association, the second column shows the degree of "net" association between each ethnic group and girl child marriage. The comparison between the two correlation values, therefore, indicates the effect of the development factor on the prevalence of girl child marriage. In the table, the groups are arranged in four blocks according to the direction and strength of the simple correlation values.

Table 2: Correlation Coefficient (r) between Ethnic Groups and Girl Child Marriage, Nepal, 1991

Ethnic Group	Correlation Coefficient	
	Simple	Partial+
Chamar	.884**	.883**
Kurmi	.847**	.844**
Muslim	.820**	.826**
Kumhar	.820**	.816**
Dhobi	.812**	.816**
Kayastha	.760**	.758**
Bania	.758**	.765**
Other in Terai	.757**	.774**
Teli	.719**	.722**
Yadav/Ahir	.709**	.707**
Mallah	.683**	.685**
Sudhi/Kalwar	.673**	.674**
Dhusadh	.647**	.645**
Kanu	.631**	.629**
Terai Bahun	.625**	.625**
Kushwha	.608**	.609**
Rajput	.585**	.592**
Kewat	.499**	.508**
Dhanuk	.450**	.452**
Musahar	.433**	.445**
Rajbhar	.427**	.439**
Haluwai	.350*	.364*
Khatway	.290*	.293*
Marwadi	.287*	.422*

Ethnic Group	Correlation Coefficient	
	Simple	Partial[+]
Damai	-.379[**]	-.465[**]
Other in Hill	-.329[*]	-.341[*]
Chhetri	-.309[*]	-.493[**]
Rai	-.297[*]	-.277[*]
Hill Bahun	-.292[*]	-.264[*]
Tharu	.223	.214
Shikh	.130	.165
Kumal	.013	.034
Bote	.006	.034
Sarki	-.257	-.284
Limbu	-.236	-.213
Newar	-.230	-.195
Sunuwar	-.223	-.213
Sherpa	-.216	-.216
Tamang	-.201	-.199
Gurung	-.200	-.186
Other in Mountain	-.188	-.171
Sanyasi	-.187	-.234
Bhote	-.180	-.179
Raute	-.173	-.242
Kami	-.154	-.320
Majhi	-.138	-.126
Magar	-.131	-.121
Lepcha	-.124	-.134
Dhimal	-.106	-.075
Rajbanshi	-.103	-.076
Thakali	-.095	-.092
Thami	-.094	-.087
Gangain	-.078	-.049
Gaine	-.076	-.060
Chepang	-.068	-.059
Jirel	-.067	-.060
Raji	-.053	≈.085
Wadi	-.037	-.098
Churoute	-.032	.011
Darai	-.023	.004
Bengali	-.016	.029
Thakuri	-.008	-.149
Danuwar	-.004	-.004

[**]P<.001; [*]P<.01

[+] Refers to beta coefficients controlling for the effect of the level of development (Human Development Index).

Note: The ethnic groups are listed in the table in four blocks according to the strength and direction of correlation coefficient values.

Three main findings emerge from the results. First, of the several groups, 24 groups are significantly and positively associated with higher prevalence of girl child marriage at the district level. These groups represent 23.7% of the total population. Several of these groups have correlation ranging between 0.61 and 0.88.

Five groups, representing 34.8% of the total population, are negatively correlated with girl child marriage. Compared to the groups with positive correlation (first block), these groups generally have weak (ranging between -.29 and -.38) but significant correlation.

Second, 34 groups are not significantly correlated with girl child marriage. This means the district-level girl child marriage does not vary significantly, regardless of the districts these groups live in. The 34 groups with no statistically significant association with girl child marriage represent the largest percentage, 41.4%, of the total population.

Third and most important, the level of development is not the principle factor in producing variations in district-level prevalence of girl child marriage. Even after controlling for the effects of the level of development, most of the correlation values remain largely intact, as indicated by the partial correlations. Development affects the degree of association in a significant way for only few groups: Marwadi, Dami, Chhetri, and Hill Bahun. In the vast majority of the cases, ethnicity has an independent strong association with the district-level variation in girl child marriage.

In further analysis, we pooled the data on ethnic groups that (a) are significantly (at p<.01) associated with the prevalence of girl child marriage and (b) have the same direction of relationship, and then carried out multiple regression analyses in order to assess the magnitude or strength of the relationship between the prevalence of girl child marriage and ethnicity. The main advantage of doing so is to reduce the number of regressions and, at the same time, obtain robust estimates. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Regression Results of the Effects of Ethnicity and Development on Girl Child Marriage, Nepal, 1991: District-Level Results

Variable	Beta Coefficient	R^2	F
Development	-.192[*]		
Twenty-four ethnic groups[+]	.819[**]		
		.700	84.00[**]
Development	-.282[*]		
Five ethnic groups[++]	-.581[**]		
		.356	19.90[**]
Development	-.188[*]		
Twenty-four ethnic groups[+]	.834[**]		
Five ethnic groups[++]	.021		
		.700	55.28[**]

Note: Development refers to the Human Development Index (HDI), which comprises three development components: expectation of life at birth, literacy, and resource access. For details, see Thapa (1995b).

[+] As listed in the first block of Table 2. [++] As listed in the second block of Table 2.

[**]P<.001; [*]P<.01

The 24 ethnic groups and the development variable explain 70% of the district-level variation in the prevalence of girl child marriage (as indicated by the results in the first panel of the table). The development variable is also statistically significant, implying that the level of a district's development is associated with a lower prevalence of girl child marriage. However, the level of development has only a secondary effect; ethnicity has the principle effect.

The results in the second panel of the table indicate that the five ethnic groups are negatively associated with the prevalence of girl child marriage. Further, the level of development also has an independent significant effect. The total variance explained by the two variables, development and ethnicity, is only 35.6%.

Finally, the results in the bottom panel of the table include both the ethnic sub-groups (positively as well as negatively related ethnic groups to the prevalence of girl child marriage) and the development variable in a single multivariate equation model. The three variables explain 70% of the total district-level variations in the prevalence of girl child marriage. The

addition of the five ethnic groups as another independent variable in the model did not add to the proportion of the variance already explained by the two variables in the first equation model.

The 24 ethnic groups thus remain the most important in explaining higher prevalence of girl child marriage. The five ethnic groups are not independently associated, suggesting that their effects in decreasing the prevalence of girl child marriage are not significant. The 24 ethnic groups arc the primary source for the prevalence of girl child marriage. The level of development has an independent, but relatively weak, association with the district-level prevalence of girl child marriage. The results confirm that ethnicity is the principle factor in determining the district-level variations in the prevalence girl child marriage in Nepal.

Discussion and Conclusion

Nepal's population is an ethnic mosaic. The 1991 census provided, for the first time, data on ethnic groups in the country. The data afford the opportunity to analyze the role of the ethnic factor in socioeconomic development as well as marital and reproductive patterns at the aggregate, district level in Nepal. This research sought to examine the role of the ethnic factor in girl child marriage.

The analysis found that the prevalence of girl child marriage in the 75 districts in Nepal is closely related to ethnic group membership. Twenty-four ethnic groups, representing nearly 24% of the total population of the country, are positively associated with higher prevalence of girl child marriage. The level of socioeconomic development also influences the prevalence of girl child marriage, but this has only a secondary effect. These results are similar to those referring to female age at marriage for all age groups (Thapa 1996).

The 24 ethnic groups are mostly concentrated in the Terai ecological region, where the cultural norms and practices are heavily influenced by the culture of north India (Bista 1972; Gautam and Thapa-Magar 1994; Thapa 1989). In contrast to other groups, especially in the Mountain region, the women belonging to the Terai groups are generally confined to farming; they exercise considerably less control over the economic resources and household decision-making. Women are typically considered as an economic burden. Premarital courtship or marriage by consent are generally not accepted. Marriages are usually arranged by parents. The patriarch generally assumes the full authority.

Interviews with girls and women in Siraha, a district with a high prevalence of girl child marriage, suggest that there are social and economic pressures underlying girl child marriage (Appendix). The prevalence of girl

child marriage is thus closely tied to values, norms and institutional arrangements specific to certain ethnic groups.

Since changes in normative and institutional practices are often a slow process, it is not surprising that the mean age at marriage (female) has increased only slowly over the decades, from about 15 years in 1961 to 18 years in 1991 (CBS 1995:181). Clearly, significant increases in age at marriage is a colossal process. Due to weak implementation and monitoring systems, the enforcement of the legal age at marriage (for females, 16 with parental consent and 18 without) remains difficult. As indicated by the census data, marriages below the legal age tend to occur frequently in Nepal.

The enhancement of women's status by raising age at marriage through legal means will remain a difficult task unless strong implementation and monitoring systems are developed in the Nepalese context. Multi-sectoral approaches such as increasing female literacy, eliminating legal discrimination against property rights, encouraging non-agricultural employment for women, and raising social awareness may be some of the effective ways to bring about normative and structural, as well as institutional, changes at the societal level.

Unless such inputs are introduced on a massive scale, the results of this study clearly suggest that a mere linear improvement in the level of socioeconomic development cannot be expected to significantly reduce the prevalence of girl child marriage in Nepal. Ethnic institutions and social networks remain key determinants. The prevalence of girl child marriage may be reduced considerably only when the legal, social and economic programs are able to affect and mobilize the vast majority of the ethnic groups in the country.

The World Summit for Children held at the United Nations in New York reaffirmed the collective commitments of all the member nations to improve the social, economic and health conditions of male and female children. There has thus been increasing voice for children's rights. Nepal has joined many other nations in this global awakening.

Age at marriage is an internationally regarded indicator of women's status (Safilios-Rothschild 1986). Increases in age at marriage also mean minimizing first births to teenage mothers, which is known to carry significantly higher risk to the mother and child than when children are born to a mother after the age of 18 (Hobcraft 1987).

The saying, "think globally and act locally" aptly applies in the case of child marriages. The global awakening must be translated into action. Nepal's "National Programme of Action for Children and Development for the 1990s" (NPC 1991) fails to recognize the prevalence of child marriage and possible policy and programmatic approaches to combatting it. The

practice of marrying too young is a social evil and can be controlled only when confronted as such. Collective efforts must, therefore, be made by the public policy-making and implementing agencies, non-governmental pressure groups, and above all, community watch groups to reach the goal of eradicating child marriage in Nepal. The social environment would change faster if deliberate and strategic attempts were applied to it.

APPENDIX

Micro-Level Perspectives on
Child Marriage in Siraha District

In March 1996, I visited a few villages in Siraha district in an attempt to explore some of the reasons underlying the high prevalence of girl child marriages. Siraha is the least developed district among the five Terai districts in the eastern region (Thapa 1995b) and has a high prevalence of child marriage (Table 1).

The elders acknowledged that girls marry very young (ideally around 12) in their villages but said that things are slowly changing. "If we waited too long we can't find boys for our daughters," was the common comment made by many elders. "Unlike in the hills and mountains, we marry our children while they are still young," said a jubilant family on the way home after doing the shopping for their son's marriage. I inquired whether they were aware that the law prescribes that a girl should not be married before reaching the age of 16. "That kind of law does not apply to our people," the mother of the family responded laughingly.

I asked a group of women (mostly around 20 years old) in a literacy evening class about their opinion as to why the girls in their villages marry in the early teens. "By the time we reach 10 or so (before puberty) our parents start to worry about our marriage until we are married," one woman commented. "What happens if a girl waits till she is a bit older?" I asked. "Our parents can't find boys if we wait too long. Boys also don't like mature girls to marry," some said. "We can't question our parents," still others said. "That's the way it has been done by our forefathers. We don't need to have any special reason for getting married early. That is just the way it is," some observed smilingly. Further probing with them and others revealed some important reasons, however.

One of the most important ones appeared to be economic. The older and more educated the boys, the more costly the marriage. Dowry in the form of both cash and kind are common in many of the communities. "It is cheaper to marry while our daughters are still young, because we don't have to pay too much to the groom," some elders commented. The older the boy, the more likely he is to be educated and have a job. And this means the groom's family can demand more dowry. This also implies that families from particularly poor economic backgrounds are more likely to engage in child marriages. In consideration of pure economics, "sometimes parents agree to give their daughters even at a very tender age," commented a health educator.

Another reason related to parental perception of obligations. The parents want to fulfill their responsibilities early on and free themselves from any continuing anxiety. A teacher commented that the villagers consider a girl in the family as a "family object" to be given away to another family; therefore, the earlier the better, and cheaper, too.

Related to this is also the fear of "things getting out of hand." "Some parents fear elopement and hence social stigmatization if grown-up girls are left unmarried at home," said a social worker. "It will be a life-long remorse for the parents if that should happen." They will be looked down upon by others as "irresponsible and bad" parents. There is a related kind of community pressure to have the girls married by the time they reach menarche: "If grown-up girls are left unmarried, the neighbors grow skeptical and suspect there might be something wrong with the girl or the family," commented the health educator. Clearly, there is interplay of economic and sociocultural factors behind the early age of girl child marriages.

Acknowledgements

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