POLICY BRIEF:
NEPAL

**DIGITAL ECOSYSTEM ANALYSIS
ON CHILD MARRIAGE
IN NEPAL**

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QUILT.AI

CONTENTS

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INTRODUCTION

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Nepal has the third-highest prevalence of child marriage, with 41 per cent of women aged 20 to 24 married before they turn 18.[1] Nepal also ranks in the top 10 countries for the prevalence of child marriage among boys.[2]

COVID-19 has further exacerbated cases of child marriage. People were pushed into poverty as they lost their jobs during the ongoing pandemic, and children had to stop attending school. This makes children vulnerable to early marriage, which has long-term consequences. Child marriage leads to children dropping out of school. They often bear children, leading to significant health risks for the mother and child.[4]

The Government of Nepal has been proactive in dealing with the issues of child marriage. The Government outlawed the practice in 1963. There is also a national strategy to end child marriage that takes a multi-sectoral approach, from educating girls and boys to mobilizing families and communities.[5] Several non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations are also working towards ending the issue of child marriage in Nepal. The initiatives aim at intensive community mobilization, transforming social norms, raising awareness and empowering girls and young women through skill development and dialogue.

Nepal has witnessed a steady increase in mobile and Internet users. Internet penetration in the country has increased from 9 per cent in 2011 to 36.7 per cent in 2021. Digital technology, including radio, SMS, mobile applications and social media, can be reliable tools to raise awareness and compel individuals and organizations to take action against child marriage.

People have taken to social media to rally around issues such as child marriage. Therefore, it becomes imperative to tap into the online space to understand perceptions existing within the community. This understanding can drive culturally informed initiatives by the Government, non-profit organizations and individuals. Quilt.AI, in partnership with the UNFPA Asia Pacific Regional Office, combines digital research and artificial intelligence to understand people's behaviours and attitudes towards child marriage in Nepal.

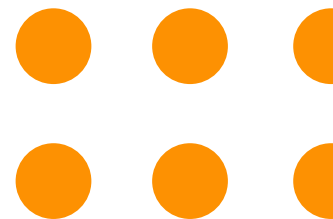[1] https://www.unicef.org/nepal/media/401/file/Ending%20Child%20Marriage%20in%20Nepal.pdf
[2] https://www.unicef.org/nepal/press-releases/nepal-among-top-10-countries-prevalence-child-marriage-among-boys-unicef
[3] https://www.unfpa.org/publications/state-world-population-2020
[4] https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/09/09/our-time-sing-and-play/child-marriage-nepal
[5] http://www.moljpa.gov.np/en/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Civil-code.pdf

METHODOLOGY

Big data from online searches and public posts were analysed for India to identify potential trends related to child marriage. The reference period for search data ranged from April 2021 to March 2022, whereas for social media posts it ran from January 2018 to April 2022.

For Nepal, 32 keywords and 4,880 unique searches were analysed. Keywords were determined by consulting language used in the local and English-medium media and reports from NGOs. This was followed by a brief literature review of child marriage prevalence in the country. The keyword list was later used by a search analysis tool to determine which keywords produced online volume. The final keyword list reflects how individuals are searching for these terms in Nepal, including local terms. Historical search data for each keyword was extracted for the month-to-month comparison of data.

For the analysis, keywords were clustered into three categories: information-seeking, law-related and help-seeking, and an aggregate of the three.[6] The categories are defined as:

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- **INFORMATION-SEEKING:**
general searches about child marriage or early marriage
(e.g. "child marriage", "what are disadvantages of early marriage")

- **LAW-RELATED:**
searches related to the legal age of marriage
(e.g. "legal age to marry")

- **HELP-SEEKING:**
searches about needing help from leaving a child or early marriage
(e.g. "report a child marriage")

The social media discourse analysis included a qualitative read of 200 social media posts across Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to better understand what people are discussing on child marriage.

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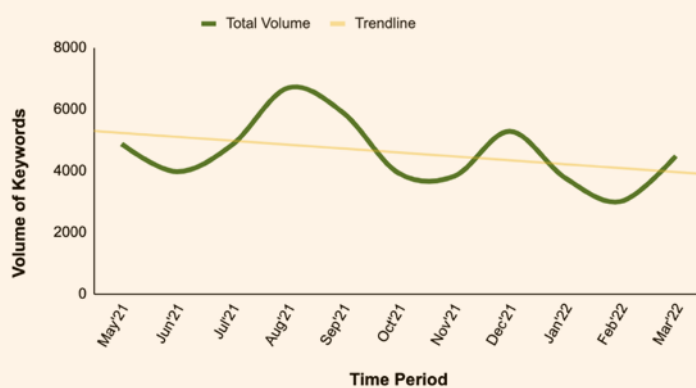[6] Examples of categorized keywords are listed in the appendix.

FINDINGS: SEARCH ANALYSIS

Google search trends were analysed in order to understand people's interest in child marriage over the past year. A look at the total volume of searches found that there was a growth of 27 per cent from July to August 2021. In August 2021, the volume of searches was 6,690, the highest in the past year. The spike of searches in August could be due to multiple ongoing awareness initiatives. Firstly, Action Aid Nepal hosted a youth-led campaign against child marriage[7] that gained traction in the media. Secondly, UNICEF Nepal launched a report on preventing child marriage and school dropout,[8][9] which also received media coverage.
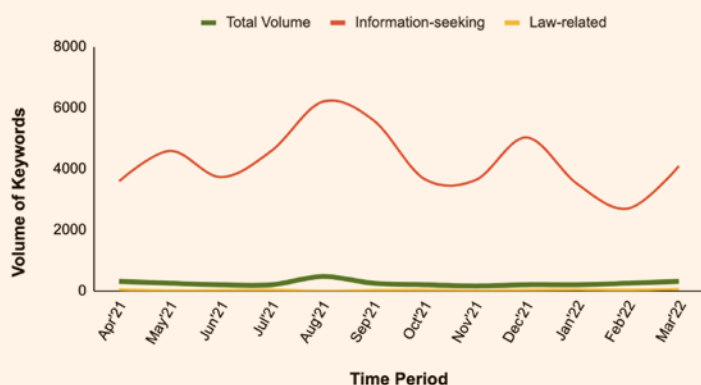
The search keywords peaked in December 2021 again, with a growth of 25 per cent from November 2021 to December 2021. In this time frame, several media sources such as OnlineKhabar and Nepali Times were reporting on the effect of COVID-19 on child marriage as more people are pushed into poverty due to unemployment.

A breakdown of each category shows that keywords related to information-seeking had the highest volume over the year compared with the law-related and help-seeking keywords.

Total child marriage searches in Nepal (April 2021 to March 2022)

— Total Volume   — Trendline

In the information-seeking category, the keywords with the highest rate of change were "children's marriage" and "childrens marriage" at 25 per cent each.

Other keywords that showed a positive rate of growth were "बालविवाह" [child marriage] at 7.3 per cent, "Nepal marriage age" at 6.43 per cent and "disadvantages of early marriage" at 6.35 per cent.

Volume of searches by category in Nepal (April 2021 to March 2022)

— Total Volume   — Information-seeking   — Law-related

[7] https://nepal.actionaid.org/stories/2021/youth-led-campaign-against-child-marriage
[8] https://odi.org/en/publications/preventing-school-dropout-and-early-marriage-in-nepal/
[9] https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/news/child-marriage-rises-in-rolpa-depite-legal-prohibition/

FINDINGS: SOCIAL MEDIA ANALYSIS

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🔊 People denounce child marriage on Twitter

On social media, 200 posts related to child marriage were analysed. Of all the posts, a majority (88 per cent) of the discourse emerged from Twitter. NGOs, local media outlets and the general public posted tweets about child marriage. Posts from NGOs and media news covered initiatives to raise awareness or end child marriage (e.g. youth clubs, scholarships), including discussing the dangers of pregnancy and childbirth at an early age (1,2,3,4,5,6). The media and NGOs had two types of narratives: sharing data on the prevalence and consequences of early/child marriage and personal records of girls who had been married early.

Tweets from the general public denounced child marriage as wrong and said it must be ended. Some posts also reshared data and narratives from NGOs and media to support their stance.

In several tweets, people restated data that Nepal has the third-highest prevalence of child marriage in South Asia and called for the country to do more to end it (1,2,3,4,5,6).

When using the Nepali term for child marriage, "बालविवाह", more public citizens' opinions emerged on Twitter versus when using English phrases. This could reflect that local media outlets reporting on a child or early marriage in Nepali are more effective in reaching public citizens than NGOs, which post mostly in English.

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🔊 Twitter and Facebook have the highest discourse

Among the three online platforms studied, Twitter and Facebook had the highest volume of content compared with YouTube. Twitter had content from NGOs, media and public citizens. On the other hand, Facebook only had posts from public citizens and NGOs that shared opinions on child marriage or awareness campaigns (1,2,3,4). In some of the posts, there was a focus on how COVID-19 has increased the prevalence of child marriage.

In others, it highlights how young people are leading initiatives to end child marriage through creative means such as theatre performances in public areas or by improving girls' education. There are also references on Facebook and Twitter that cite the poor maternal and child mortality rate in Nepal and call out child/early marriage as one of the reasons for it.

13 https://prsindia.org/files/bills_acts/bills_parliament/2021/The%20Prohibition%20Of%20Child%20Marriage%20(Amendment)%20Bill,%202021.pdf

Two videos had the most comments (1,2) posted by NGOs such as UNICEF Nepal, Human Rights Watch and Zonta International Club. In one of the videos, there was information about child marriage laws in Nepal; the comments had questions about which age was the legal age of marriage. People shared their experiences of turning 18 or being about to turn 20 years old and wanting to marry their boyfriend or girlfriend. The second video was a drama about a girl who had to leave school to get married early. It condemned early marriage and shared data about how many girls are affected in Nepal. The comments supported the video and empathized with the main character by relating it to their elderly relatives' (e.g. grandmothers) experience of marrying early.

The comments on YouTube and discourse on Facebook and Twitter show a high awareness of the prevalence of child marriage in Nepal and its consequences, especially among those who use the platforms in English and Nepali.

Discourse is led by NGOs and local media

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Local and international NGOs create all the content on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube that raises awareness about child or early marriage. This includes videos, images, memes and hashtags (e.g. #ItTakesNepal, #EndChildMarriage), which local media or public citizens then reshare.

NGOs are also engaged with the most by public citizens on Twitter versus on Facebook. Since Twitter is a platform to share public opinions, people use it to engage with discourse on child marriage and share their arguments against it. Furthermore, Nepali-medium news sources are more active in sharing child marriage news and data than English-medium sources. Nepali news sources share shorter articles with bite-sized information that is easy to read by public citizens. This is especially in comparison with English news sources, which are longer and use technical terms.

When searching about child marriage in Nepal, the top five websites that emerge are:

- **UNICEF:** https://www.unicef.org/protection/child-marriage
- **Girls Not Brides – about Child Marriage:** https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/about-child-marriage/
- **Wikipedia – Child marriage:** https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/about-child-marriage/
- **Nepal UNFPA:** https://nepal.unfpa.org/en/node/15217
- **Save the Children – Child Marriage:** https://www.savethechildren.org/us/charity-stories/child-marriage-a-violation-of-child-rights

Since the general public engage with content from local media and information about the legal age to marry, NGOs must redirect them to such relevant websites. Instead of focusing on general websites and organizations that work on child marriage, or descriptions of it, redirecting them to websites on how to report it or the consequences of it in the local language can help trigger awareness or action at a local level.

[14] https://www.jurist.org/commentary/2021/10/dhaval-sheth-compulsory-registration-child-marriages-india

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RECOMMENDATIONS

To garner more attention around child marriage and engage public citizens, there are several recommendations for leveraging online platforms:

- Local and international NGOs should amplify their messages through Twitter and see Facebook and YouTube as secondary platforms. As there is more discourse and resharing on Twitter, it is a potential platform to mobilize in Nepal.

- The content should focus on easy-to-understand data (e.g. Nepal has the third-highest prevalence of child marriage or maternal mortality is bad because of child marriage). It should also focus on the stories of girls who were or are in child marriages, as these garner high engagement.

- Utilize local media strategically to mobilize around the issue. Local media are active in reporting on child marriage, which garners more discussion from the general public. A clear call to action, for example through hashtags or advertising on-ground events (e.g. theatre plays), should be continuously pushed through local media. That way, consistently sharing and engaging with the news portals will also help shift people's behaviours to action.

- YouTube videos should focus on narratives that have garnered high engagement. For example, one video on child marriage in Nepal provided information on the legal age to marry and the consequences of marrying underage. The video attracted comments and personal questions on when people could marry their girlfriends and boyfriends. Therefore, more informal videos that directly answer people's questions will be helpful. Further, instead of simply focusing on child marriage,[10] in the context of Nepal it is also essential to communicate about "child love marriages" under the age of 18.

CONCLUSION

To curb the trend of child marriage in Nepal, it is necessary to activate online and on-ground initiatives that reach those who are vulnerable to child marriage and build a movement among the general public.

The search and social media data show a certain awareness of and interest in child marriage and its consequences. However, there is limited information available on the legal age of marriage, but higher interest in it among the public. Therefore, creating a private group with content on this that engages teenagers and those in areas where people are vulnerable to child love marriages is critical. It is also essential to use the local language and emotional appeal through personal narratives to mobilize the general public.

COVID-19 has exacerbated the poverty level in Nepal and increased children's vulnerability to child or early marriages. Furthermore, online mediums should address the unique prevalence of underage individuals eloping in Nepal, which is counted as child or early marriage. Now is the time to act to curb the practice by reaching people online. Through a collaborative effort of NGOs, local media and public opinion, it is possible to reach various sectors of society to help prevent and tackle child or early marriage.

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