



# CHILD MARRIAGE IN HUMANITARIAN SETTINGS

EARTHQUAKE-AFFECTED DISTRICTS IN NEPAL

**C**onsistent with other countries in South Asia, Nepal has experienced declines in rates of child marriage during the last two decades, though it still has the second highest rate in the region. **Within Nepal, higher rates of child marriage tend to correlate with lower rates of education, rural setting, and lower socioeconomic status, which is historically tied to caste and ethnic discrimination.**

In April and May of 2015, two major earthquakes and their aftershocks struck Nepal, triggered landslides that devastated rural villages, and damaged some of the most densely populated parts of Kathmandu. Nearly 9,000 people were killed, 22,000 were injured, and 2.8 million people were displaced. **For many**

**households, the displacement lasted weeks or months**, with some setting up temporary shelters next to their damaged houses. Others were displaced for years, and some – especially young men – chose to move permanently to Kathmandu or abroad.

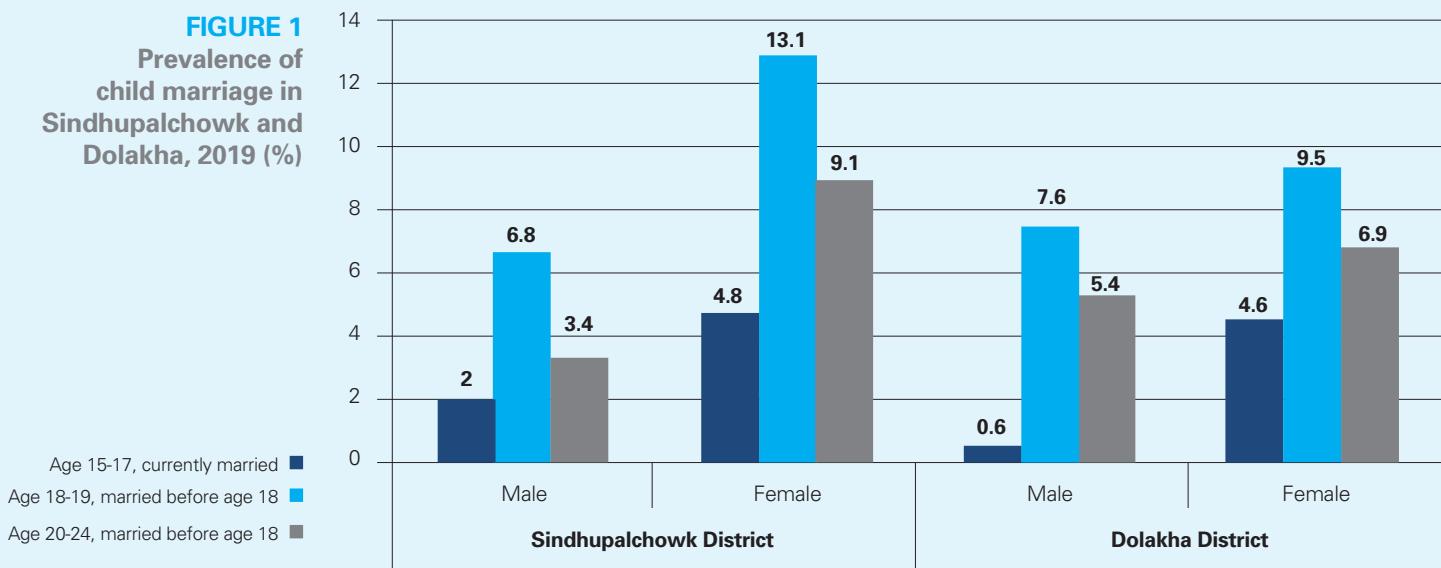
This policy brief summarizes **key findings from two of the most severely affected districts, Sindhupalchowk and Dolakha**, based on the report, *Child Marriage in Humanitarian Settings in South Asia: Study Results from Bangladesh and Nepal*. While the report covers a wider range of aspects of child marriage in the years following the earthquakes, this brief will focus on prevalence, influencing factors, and recommendations.

As of 2019,  
**7 per cent**  
of Nepalese men aged  
20-24 in urban areas  
– and 14 per cent in  
rural areas – had been  
married before age 18.

**40 per cent**  
of Nepalese women  
aged 20-24 said that  
marriage was the main  
reason to discontinue  
their education.

# PREVALENCE OF CHILD MARRIAGE

**FIGURE 1**  
Prevalence of child marriage in Sindhupalchowk and Dolakha, 2019 (%)



The prevalence of child marriage in Sindhupalchowk and Dolakha is typically lower than the national average of Nepal, which historically has been high but is on the decline. Marriage before age 15 is very rare in both districts.

Figure 1 shows the prevalence of marriage prior to age 18 among progressively older age groups in each district: respondents who were aged 15-17 at the time of the late 2019 survey, those aged 18-19, and those aged 20-24. It is important to note that **since more adolescents aged 15-17 may have married after the survey took place, the prevalence rate for this age group should be considered an underestimation**, and is not directly comparable to the rates of the other two age groups. However, it is possible that these data do indicate a spike in child marriage rates following the 2015 earthquakes, and a subsequent drop-off. In interviews, **more than a quarter of respondents specifically mentioned that the prevalence of child marriage is declining**.

## Patterns shown by the data include:

- Across all age groups and both districts, **more girls than boys** are married before age 18.
- **Girls in Sindhupalchowk have been the most likely to experience child marriage** in any age group, although nearly as many girls in Dolakha are married when comparing the 15-17 age groups.
- While **more boys were married before 18 in Dolakha than in Sindhupalchowk** in the 20-24 and 18-19 age groups, that is **no longer the case** for boys aged 15-17, seemingly due to migration of married boys to Kathmandu.

According to household survey respondents, the prevalence of child marriage was the highest among the Terai Dalit, followed by the Hill Dalit, and the Magar. Qualitative respondents also reported that elopement was highest among the Tamang community, which could contribute to rates of child marriage in that group as **elopement is correlated with earlier marriage age**.

*"Child marriage has been on the decline in the last 2-3 years. In the past, child marriage was very common."*

– MARRIAGE REGISTRAR FROM SINDHUPALCHOWK DISTRICT

*"People generally get married through elopement [in the Tamang community]. If they like someone, they elope with them and get married. The parents have no say in this."*

– WOMAN AGED 20-24 IN SINDHUPALCHOWK DISTRICT

*"Before the earthquake, adolescents were married at 16 or 17 but now the age of marriage has increased. The programme "bihebari 20 barsa pari" (marriage only after the age of 20 years) has led to the delay in marriage among girls and boys."*

– MARRIED BOY IN DOLAKHA DISTRICT

# FACTORS AFFECTING CHILD MARRIAGE RATES

**FIGURE 2**

**Key factors in child marriage in Sindhupalchowk and Dolakha Districts, 2019**

As Figure 2 illustrates, similar factors may either drive or moderate child marriage, depending on the specifics. As child marriage was already on the decline, the Act Relating to Children was enacted in 2018 to strengthen the legal framework. Thus, it is difficult to determine precisely what to attribute to the earthquakes, but text in green indicates factors that were closely linked to them. Other points to note include:

- Almost twice as many girls as boys named family honour as the primary factor influencing the age of their marriage.
- Parents reported that families could identify better partners for their children while the adolescents are younger, as “good” partners tend to get married first.
- Internet and cellular connectivity in these districts increased after earthquakes, as infrastructure was rebuilt.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations of the report primarily encompass efforts to address child marriage in humanitarian settings in South Asia more generally, focusing on common themes across both Bangladesh and Nepal. These include further research on what works to effectively programme to end child marriage; programming that focuses on bolstering economic and physical security, shifting social norms, and including the needs of adolescent boys; and policy that addresses the impact of legislation, the varying types of child marriage in play, and the importance of continuity of access to civil registration.

Specific recommendations concerning earthquake-affected districts in Nepal include the following:

## RESEARCH

- Investigate the impact on **other populations that have been affected by this crisis**, but which are not included in the geographical areas in this report, including the boys who migrated to Kathmandu and could not be reached.
- Further research is merited on the **effects of migration and displacement** on patterns of child marriage, such as marrying early in order to take a bride to the city for a migrating worker.
- More study is needed to understand the nature and extent of **social media's role in changing marriage patterns**.
- Child marriage in settings affected by natural disaster remains understudied. The findings of this study including on the increase in young people's agency, decline in arranged marriages and linkages between use of social media and self-initiated marriage in Nepal, raise questions

about **the impacts of natural disasters on marriage and family formation**. Whether or not these changes in young people's agency, decline in family arranged marriages, self-initiation and use of social media were a magnification of an existing trend or the result of the emergency and its aftermath, and how these changes affect patterns of child marriage are important areas for further research.

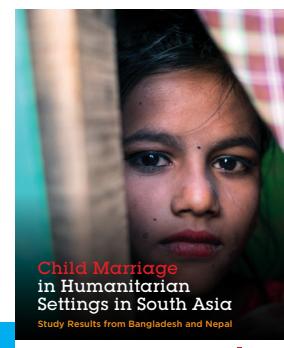
- The effects of **COVID-19** on child marriage warrant additional study.

## PROGRAMMING

- **Adolescent boys** must be included in programming, for their own sakes as well as for the sakes of women and girls. This was evident in Nepal, including for boys who were migrating for work and entering into early marriages linked to outmigration. Boys are getting married, boys are on social media and are courting girls; their engagement is critical to build healthy relationships and communities where girls and women are valued and respected.

## POLICY

- **Legislation** must be monitored for its impact on child marriage in humanitarian settings. In Nepal, whether the high legal age of marriage creates incentives to elope, particularly in settings affected by disaster or other acute stressors, should be investigated and addressed.



Read the full report, *Child Marriage in Humanitarian Settings in South Asia: Study Results from Bangladesh and Nepal*, at  
<https://www.unicef.org/rosa/reports/child-marriage-humanitarian-settings-south-asia> or  
<https://asiapacific.unfpa.org/en/publications/child-marriage-humanitarian-settings-south-asia>

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