Unmasking vulnerabilities: The impact of COVID-19 on the determinants of child marriage in South Asia

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The programme interventions and support highlighted in this report were identified based on field observations and stakeholder perspectives during the data collection period from November 2022 to January 2023. This study reflects the context, priorities, and initiatives as they existed at that time and does not represent current UNICEF programmes and activities.

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Foreword

South Asia leads the world in reducing child marriage. Yet the region is still home to nearly half of the world's child brides.

Nearly one in four young women in South Asia was first married or in a union before turning 18 years, a clear breach of their right to protection as enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Most child brides give birth as adolescents and are forced to abandon school. In many places, marriage and schooling are viewed as incompatible.

The fight to eliminate child marriage by 2030 is on. But for South Asia to eliminate child marriage by 2030, the current rate of progress needs to be seven times faster.

The effort to end child marriage is challenged by shocks and stresses. The impact of COVID-19 was a major disruptor. Global estimates tell us that there will be an additional 10 million child brides due to COVID-19 in the current decade. The pandemic intensified poverty, inequality and violence, and affected children's lives profoundly.

As we emerge from the pandemic, we must acknowledge the harsh realities of this post-COVID-19 context, and how this affects the lives of children in South Asia.

Unmasking Vulnerabilities: the impact of COVID-19 on the determinants of child marriage in South Asia, commissioned by UNICEF South Asia, sheds light on the complex interplay between COVID-19 and child marriage. It reveals how crises can exacerbate the factors that drive child marriage and highlights the need for immediate action.

The socio-economic impacts of the pandemic, such as school closures and economic hardships, contributed to negative coping mechanisms, including resorting to marrying children. The pandemic amplified existing gender norms and contributed to increased violence against married girls.

Throughout the study, you will read testimonials from girls whose lives changed dramatically.

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As one adolescent girl told the research team:

"During COVID, I had to leave my school where I could never return. I wish I could have joined my school again. When I was at home, my marriage was decided by my parents. I am the eldest one and my parents wanted to lessen the burden because they have to prepare for my younger sister's marriage. I could continue my school if Corona had not affected us."

These are the voices at the heart of the strategic recommendations to end child marriage. Enhancing data collection, promoting social and behaviour change, and improving access to multi-sectoral services including education and social protection are some of the most important ones. The study also emphasizes the importance of recognizing the unique vulnerabilities of marginalized communities and tailoring interventions to meet their specific needs.

Ending child marriage, a deeply rooted social practice, is a daunting undertaking. But it is possible. It will take concerted action from policymakers and parents, community leaders and religious figures. It will take children and young people speaking up for their rights. It will take perseverance. And urgency. It is not too late for millions of girls across South Asia who depend on UNICEF to protect them and help them realize their promise and potential.

Sanjay Wijesekera
UNICEF South Asia Regional Director

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Acronyms

CEDAW	UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
COVID-19	Coronavirus 2019
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
DHS	Demographic and Health Survey
FGD	Focus group discussion
KII	Key informant interview
MICS	Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey
NFHS	National Family Health Survey
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NPA	National Plan of Action Research
ROSA	Regional Office for South Asia
SAARC	South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
SRH	Sexual and reproductive health
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WHO	World Health Organization

01 Introduction

1.1 Background and purpose

South Asia has among the highest rates of child marriage in the world, and girls are disproportionately affected.[1] While the region has achieved substantial reductions in child marriage rates over the last 25 years, around one in four young women is still married or in a union before her 18th birthday.[2] Of the 26 per cent of girls who are married,[3] six per cent are married before the age of 15 years.[4] Child marriage negatively impacts the health, well-being and rights of children and the consequences for girls are much more severe than for boys.[5] Marriage exposes girls to the risk of early pregnancy, maternal,[6] infant and child morbidity and mortality,[7] intimate partner violence and economic dependency.[8] It can also make girls more vulnerable to depression and anxiety, and is associated with lower levels of self-efficacy, autonomy and decision-making. Child marriage is associated with lower educational outcomes,[9] illiteracy and reduced employability due to a lack of schooling after marriage.[10] Over the long term, child marriage contributes to intergenerational poverty, poor health and disempowerment among married girls and their children.

Child marriage is driven by a complex interplay of factors that operate at the individual, family, community and structural/social levels. Its drivers include, among other things, entrenched social and cultural norms and discriminatory gender roles, inequalities, poverty, low levels of education, economic deprivation, gaps and inconsistencies in legal frameworks, weak enforcement of laws and limited access to sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services.[11] The drivers and root causes of child marriage are further exacerbated during humanitarian crises such as conflicts, natural disasters and disease outbreaks, in which families and communities experience increased insecurity, economic instability, lack of access to services such as education, the weak enforcement of laws and social disruption. These stressors may cause families to resort to child marriage as a way to protect girls from sexual violence, trafficking, and poverty, all of which are more prevalent in crisis situations. They may also view marriage as a way to secure their daughters' futures, as economic hardship and displacement limit opportunities for girls.[12]

The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020–2023 contributed significantly to increasing the levels of poverty and entrenching inequality and deprivation. COVID-19 also impacted on the everyday lives of children through the closure of schools and changes in the economic circumstances of their families. Globally, 2020 saw the largest increase in child marriage rates in 25 years, with data suggesting that rates more than doubled between March and December as compared with 2019.[13] The COVID-19 pandemic and associated containment measures reinforced the drivers of child marriage, and likely led to an increase in instances of child marriage.[14] Economic instability may have prompted families to turn to child marriage as a means of alleviating financial pressure and coping with financial instability. School closures due to COVID-19 may have inadvertently increased

[1] While boys are also given in marriage in South Asia, it is less common. United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), *A Profile of Child Marriage in South Asia,* UNICEF, Kathmandu, 2023.
[2] UNICEF, *A Profile of Child Marriage in South Asia.*
[3] Although this report refers to boys and girls in the context of marriage, many of the key informants were older when interviewed. The use of the terms "boy" and "girl" has been retained in this report as an indication of their age at the time of marriage rather than their age when interviewed.
[4] UNICEF, *A Profile of Child Marriage in South Asia.*
[5] United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), "Child Marriage", <https://www.unicef.org/protection/child-marriage>, accessed 5 November 2024.
[6] Mitra, N., et al, "Experiences of young people of child marriage and early motherhood in India", UNFPA and Centre for Excellence on Adolescence and Youth, 2015; Kamal, S.M., "Child marriage and its association with reproductive health status of women and their child well-being in Bangladesh", *Journal of Management and Training for Industries* 9(1), p. 40, 2022.
[7] Hossain, M., et al, "Child marriage and its associations with morbidity and mortality of under-5-year-old children in Bangladesh", PLOS, University of Western Australia, 9 February 2022.
[8] Raj, A., When the mother is a child: the impact of child marriage on the health and human rights of girls". *Archives of Disease in Childhood*, 95(11), pp. 931–935, 2010.
[9] Bhowmik J, Biswas RK, Hossain S., "Child marriage and adolescent motherhood: A nationwide vulnerability for women in Bangladesh", *Int J Environ Res Public Health* 18, p. 4030, 2021.
[10] Mitra, N., et al, "Experiences of young people of child marriage and early motherhood in India", 2015.
[11] United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), *Child Marriage in South Asia: An evidence review,* UNICEF, Kathmandu, 2019.
[12] United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), *Addressing Child Marriage In Humanitarian Settings, Global Programme to End Child Marriage, New York, February 2021.*
[13] World Vision, *COVID-19 and Child Marriage: How COVID-19's Impact on Hunger and Education is Forcing Children into Marriage,* 2021.
[14] Ibid


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the likelihood of girls being married, since attending school was no longer possible. Furthermore, the disruption of health services, such as adolescent-friendly reproductive health care, may increased rates of adolescent pregnancy which can, in some contexts, lead to early marriage.[15] While there are no official data on the number of girls who have been married since the beginning of COVID-19, UNICEF estimates that up to 10 million more girls are at risk of becoming child brides over the next decade, undermining progress towards the SDG target of eliminating child marriage by 2030.[16]

There is a critical need to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic and associated containment measures have impacted child marriage practices and the drivers of child marriage, and how they have influenced power dynamics and other facets of life for married adolescents. It is for this reason that UNICEF's Regional Office for South Asia (ROSA) engaged Coram International to carry out this study on the impacts of COVID-19 on determinants of child marriage in Bangladesh, India and Nepal.

1.2 Objectives

The research aimed to understand the changes brought about by COVID-19 and how these changes have impacted the drivers and moderators of child marriage; whether new drivers have emerged as a result of COVID-19 and COVID-19 containment measures; the impact of COVID-19 on girls who are already married, including assessing changes in terms of agency in decision-making and impacts of disruptions to social networks and services; the extent and nature of any shifts in the attitude of adolescents toward child marriage and the drivers and moderators of child marriage as a result of the impacts of COVID-19.

The research has been conducted as part of the Global Programme to End Child Marriage implemented by UNICEF and UNFPA, and generates knowledge to inform more effective and targeted strategies, policies and programme interventions that aim to mitigate and avert the negative impacts of COVID-19 on child marriage in South Asia, specifically in Bangladesh, India and Nepal. The study is intended to generate knowledge that may help to inform child marriage programming within public health response contexts more generally.

[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid.

1.3 Research questions

Nine specific research questions were developed for the research:

1. What changes, both temporary and long-term, are impacting (previously) identified drivers and moderators of child marriage? (Drivers included social, gender and religious norms, structural inequality, insecurity, conflict and climate, access to education, economic opportunities, access to services, social and peer group pressures, family composition and education, family poverty, family duty/pressure and an unsafe family environment, and individuals' agency, migration, experiences of violence and access to social media).
2. Have new drivers and moderators emerged?
3. If so, what are the implications of these emerging drivers and moderators for programme implementation?
4. Is there evidence of an increase in negative coping mechanisms at the household level, including child marriage, domestic violence and gender-based violence?
5. How have girls who are already married been impacted by COVID-19, including the economic impact and agency in decision-making on matters affecting them (e.g., paid work, domestic responsibilities, size of family, access to SRH/health services)?
6. How have disruptions in access to services and social networks for support impacted child marriage?
7. How have adolescents' attitudes towards child marriage (and the drivers and moderators of marriage) shifted due to COVID-19?
8. Are mental health concerns, access to education and economic opportunities and services impacting marriage decisions?
9. Is there a shift in attitudes towards self-initiated marriages?

1.4 Scope and definitions

For the purposes of this research, **child marriage** refers to any formal marriage or informal union between a child under the age of 18 years and another child or an adult. In addition to describing a formal marriage, child marriage encompasses other types of union in which a child and another person live together as if married. The reason for this is that cohabitation (living in a union as if married) raises the same human rights issues as does a formal child marriage. When a couple cohabitates, "the assumption is often that they are adults, even if one or both has not yet reached the age of 18 years."[17] Additional concerns arise out of informal cohabitation arrangements, including limitations to inheritance rights, citizenship and social recognition, which can make children within these arrangements more vulnerable.[18]

The term **early marriage** is sometimes used to describe or encompass child marriage, but can sometimes differ from child marriage. Early marriage includes "any marriage in which a spouse may not have gained the psychological maturity that enables them to give free and full consent to marriage."[19] Early marriages can therefore refer to marriages in which a person or persons over the age of 18 years are unable to give free and full consent to marriage owing to their level of physical, emotional, sexual or psychological development.[20] Early marriage may be a more appropriate term in contexts with diverse understandings of childhood or in which childhood is not defined in relation to a discrete age or number. For instance, it has been argued that in India "early marriage" is the more relevant term in light of an increasing trend of "self-arranged marriages".[21] In this research, the terms "child marriage" and "early marriage" are used interchangeably (unless specified otherwise), to refer to a marriage or marriage-like union involving at least one spouse under the age of 18 years.

[17] United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), "Child marriage", https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/child-marriage/ Accessed 5 November 2024.
[18] Ibid.
[19] United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), *Mapping of Child Marriage Initiatives in South Asia, UNICEF, Kathmandu,* 2016, p. 5.
[20] Boender, C., "The relationship between child labour and child marriage: A discourse analysis", UNICEF ROSA, Kathmandu, 2021.
[21] Ibid., p. 18.

The term forced marriage refers to "any marriage which occurs without the free and full consent of one or both of the parties and/or where one or both of the parties is/are unable to end or leave the marriage, including as a result of duress or intense social or family pressure."[22] The need for consent therefore applies both to entering a marriage and staying in a marriage. In much of human rights literature, the terms "child marriage" and "early marriage" are applied in a way that encompasses forced marriage, on the basis that meaningful or valid consent to marriage cannot be given by anyone under the age of 18 years. Discussions in the literature around child and forced marriage and the extent to which these are distinct or merged phenomena demonstrate the importance of understanding consent and the evolving capacities of adolescents. In 2019, Joint General Comment No. 31 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) on harmful practices stated that "a child marriage is considered to be a form of forced marriage, given that one and/or both parties have not expressed free and full consent" *(see information box)*.[23]

Positioning all child marriage as forced marriage fails to apply the concept of evolving capacities, does not account for the extent to which agency is culturally embedded and does not give room for understanding the potential differences between forced and early marriage from the perspective and experience of the child involved. It also does not account for the potentially quite different policy and programmatic directions that may be required to prevent such marriages. For instance, it has been noted that in South Asia, girls participate in decisions about their marriages to differing degrees, from not at all to initiating marriages through elopement.[24] For this reason, within this study, forced marriage is understood as a marriage which involves at least one participant entering into the marriage without free and full consent, and child marriage is understood as a marriage which may or may not involve consent, taking into account the evolving capacities of adolescents; that is, their ability to make informed decisions as they grow older. However, it is important to recognize that the two concepts (forced marriage and child marriage) are intimately related such that, in some cases and depending on context, it may be difficult to distinguish between the two.

In international law, child marriage and forced marriage are understood as harmful practices, forms of gender discrimination or violence against women/girls and, more generally, as a violation of fundamental human rights *(see information box)*. This was reiterated by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in its 2015 resolution on ending child, early and forced marriage in which it was recognized that "child, early and forced marriage constitutes a violation, abuse or impairment of human rights and a harmful practice that prevents individuals from living their lives free from all forms of violence, and that it has wide-ranging and adverse consequences for the enjoyment of human rights, such as the right to education and the right to the highest attainable standard of health, including sexual and reproductive health."[25] The Kathmandu Call for Action to End Child Marriage in South Asia also recognizes that "child marriage is not merely a social evil but a punishable crime and a human rights violation which triggers a continuum of harms that have a long-term detrimental impact on the lives of girls and women, not just at an individual level but also with regard to countries' overall socio-economic development and prosperity."[26]

The term **arranged marriage**, as used in this report, refers to a marriage between two individuals of whom at least one is a child under the age of 18 years and which was arranged or facilitated by someone other than the individuals within the marriage. In these instances, marriages are primarily arranged by parents or other family members. In some instances, these arranged marriages occur with the child's consent (with consideration of the above discussion on evolving capacities). In some cases, an arranged marriage would in fact be considered a forced marriage.

The term **self-initiated marriage** refers to a marriage between one or more children where the decision was led by the couple, with or without the consent of a parent. However, what individuals referred to as a self-initiated marriage often involves a level of arrangement or coercion from persons other than the couple (such as parents), or from one person in the relationship, primarily the male *(see section 4.1.2)*. Therefore, the term self-initiated marriage is used throughout the report, with recognition given to this complex dynamic.

[22] Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), Preventing and Eliminating Child, Early and Forced Marriage, A/HRC/26/22, 2 April 2014.
[23] Joint General Comment No. 31 from the CEDAW/No. 18 from the CRC Committee CEDAW/C/GC/31-CRC/C/GC/18, para. 20.
[24] Boender, C., "The relationship between child labour and child marriage".
[25] OHCHR, strengthening efforts to prevent and eliminate early, child and forced marriage, A/HRC/RES/29/8, 22 July 2015, preamble.
[26] South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), South Asia Initiative to End Violence against Children (SAIEVAC), Kathmandu Call for Action to End Child Marriage in South Asia, 7 November 2014.

Information box

International standards and obligations relating to child marriage

The earliest international instrument to specifically address early and forced marriage is the Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages, 1964, along with the (non-binding) Recommendation, 1964, which is related to the same treaty. The Marriage Convention provides that marriage must be entered into with the free and full consent of both parties[27] and that States must set a minimum age for marriage[28] (though it does not specify what this age should be). However, these instruments never gained widespread acceptance and have been widely discredited for setting the minimum threshold for marriage far too low, either at puberty[29] or at 15 years.[30]

More recently, human rights treaty bodies have established a stronger and more child-rights-appropriate standard for the minimum age of marriage, setting the threshold at no lower than 18 years of age, and have primarily recognized child and forced marriage as forms of gender-based violence and harmful practices that violate the rights of children and women/girls. Article 24(3) of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) requires States to "take all effective and appropriate measures with a view to abolishing traditional practices prejudicial to the health of children."[31] In its General Comment No 13, the CRC Committee includes child marriage in a list of acts that are considered as falling within the category of "traditional practices" referred to in Article 24(3). CEDAW sets out obligations on State parties to address harmful practices that predominantly affect girls and women.[32] Pursuant to Article 2(f) of the Convention, States are obliged to "take all appropriate measures, including legislation, to modify or abolish existing laws, regulations, customs and practices" to address discrimination against women, including acts defined as violence against women. The CEDAW Committee has found that practices including forced marriage are forms of gender-based violence, perpetuated by "traditional attitudes by which women are regarded as subordinate to men or as having stereotyped roles." [33] In its General Recommendation No 24 on the right to health, the CEDAW Committee called for "the enactment and effective enforcement of laws that prohibit female genital mutilation and marriage of girl children."[34]

The CEDAW also sets out rights in relation to non-discrimination to and within marriage. Article 16(1) includes the right to: enter marriage on the same basis and to freely choose a spouse and enter marriage with free and full consent; the same rights and responsibilities within marriage, and as parents; the same rights to decide freely on the number and spacing of children and on issues relating to guardianship, wardship, adoption and so on and access to information and education to enable this right; the same personal rights; and the same rights to ownership and enjoyment of property.[35] It should be noted that both Bangladesh and India have reservations about this provision. Bangladesh's reservations states that the country will not be bound by the provisions of Article 16(1) as "[it] conflicts with Sharia law based on Holy Quran and Sunna." Many other Muslim-dominant countries have similar reservations on these grounds.[36] India's reservation states that, while it "fully supports the principle of compulsory registration of marriages, it is not practical in a vast country like India with its variety of customs, religions and level of literacy", and, as such, obligations under Article 16(1) will be upheld in conformity with India's own "policy of non-interference in the personal affairs of any Community without its initiative and consent." CEDAW also provides that "the betrothal and the marriage of a child shall have no legal effect, and all necessary action, including legislation, shall be taken to specify a minimum age for marriage and to make the registration of marriages in an official registry compulsory."[37]

Although neither the CEDAW nor the CRC themselves explicitly state a specific minimum age for marriage, both the CEDAW Committee and the CRC Committee have clarified that treaty provisions should be understood as prohibiting marriage of a child under the age of 18 years.[38] In a joint comment on harmful practices issued in 2019,[39] both Committees reiterated that States should set a minimum age for marriage at or above 18 years for both boys and girls. However, the Committees recognized that, in order to respect the evolving capacities of children, "a marriage at an earlier age is allowed in exceptional circumstances" though "the absolute minimum age must not be below 16 years, the grounds for obtaining permission must be legitimate and strictly defined by law and the marriage must be permitted only by a court of law upon the full, free and informed consent of the child."[40]

[27] United National Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages (adopted 7 November 1962, entered into force 9 December 1964) UN Doc 1763 A (XVKK), Article 1.
[28] Ibid., Article 2.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Recommendation on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages, GA Res 2018 (XX), 1 November 1965.
[31] Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), Article 24 (3).
[32] Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), General Recommendation No. 19, para. 11.
[33] Ibid.
[34] CEDAW, General Recommendation No. 24: Women and health the right to health, 20th Sess. (1999), para. (d).
[35] CEDAW, Article 16 (1).
[36] International Centre for Missing & Exploited Children, Child Marriage in the Middle East and North Africa. 2013 <www.icmec.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Child_Marriage_in_the_MENA_Region.pdf>
[37] Article 16 (2).
[38] CEDAW, General Recommendation 21, 1994, para. 36.
[39] Joint General Comment No. 31 from CEDAW/No. 18 from the CRC Committee CEDAW/C/GC/31-CRC/C/GC/18.
[40] Ibid. Para 55(f).

02
Methodology

2.1 Conceptual framework

This research project utilizes a socio-ecological conceptual framework to understand the different determinants and moderators of child marriage. This framework considers individual decision-making being embedded within social layers operating at different levels. It conceptualizes decision-making as driven by the complex interplay between **individual** (e.g., biological and personal history), **relationship/family** (e.g., social circle, peers, family members and others), **community** (e.g., access to education, SRH services in the community) and **societal/structural** factors (e.g., social and cultural norms, legal rules regulating marriage, distribution of wealth, etc.) that may all play a role in shaping whether a child ends up in an early marriage.

The socio-ecological framework also recognizes the interrelated and interdependent nature of these factors, which should be taken into consideration when interpreting the results. As is clear in the narrative throughout this report, these factors do not operate in isolation. For instance, a factor that has been defined as a community-level factor will often be influenced by structural-level factors, while an individual-level factor may well be influenced by factors operating at community and family levels. However, by helping to clarify these factors, and the interactions between them, the model can support the design of interventions that can act at multiple levels to effect change.

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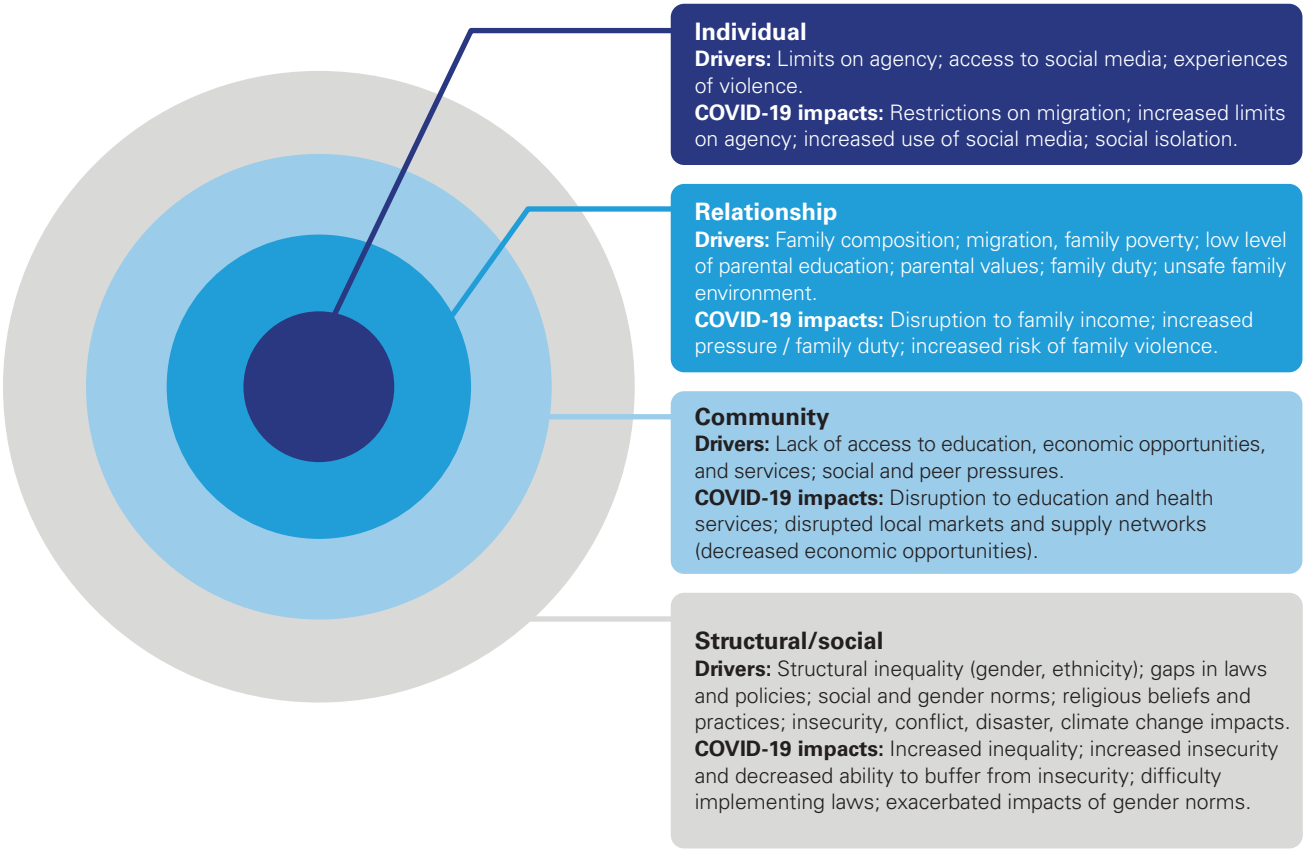
A literature review was carried out in the inception phase of this project, and its findings were used to build a conceptual framework for understanding existing drivers and moderators of child marriage at the structural, community, family and individual levels. Available data concerning COVID-19-related restrictions and containment measures in research locations were used to theorize the ways that the COVID-19 context may have impacted on these drivers and moderators by changing how they function within decisions and practices concerning child marriage; bringing out new drivers and moderators; and/or shifting the weight/importance of the drivers and moderators and the way that they interact *(for a diagrammatic summary of the conceptual framework see Figure 1)*.

Figure 1: Socio-ecological framework highlighting the drivers of child marriage alongside the impacts of COVID-19.



2.2 Methodological approaches

2.2.1 Qualitative approach

The research design was qualitative, in order to gather in- depth, meaningful and explanatory data. Qualitative data are useful for exploring subjective and contextual issues, to highlight the voices of adolescent girls and young women and explore their personal perspectives, as well as to understand and explain root causes and target interventions to achieve change. Qualitative methods were also selected to explore the views of adolescents who have experienced child marriage and other vulnerable situations such as violence and other protection risks, providing them an opportunity to discuss their perspectives in a safe and participatory manner. This was regarded as the most appropriate approach, as in-depth, participant-guided responses cannot be achieved in the same way through closed, structured, quantitative methods such as surveys.

2.2.2 Participatory approach

Among the key elements of this research were the voices and perspectives of adolescents, including vulnerable groups of adolescents and their broader communities. The research employed a participatory approach to ensure that participants were provided a safe space to share their perceptions and experiences, and data collection methods and tools were designed to minimize the imposition of external preconceptions and priorities *(for details of participatory approaches and sampling approaches see section 2.3)*.

2.3 Data collection methods

A range of qualitative data collection methods were used, including individual in-depth interviews with adolescents and young people who were married during the COVID-19 restrictions and their parents/ caregivers; focus group discussions with community members; participatory group exercises with adolescents; and key informant interviews.

2.3.1 Individual interviews (adolescents/ youth, parents and caregivers)

A key component of in-country data collection involved a series of in-person, in-depth qualitative interviews with adolescents, parents and caregivers. The adolescents and youth who were interviewed were married during COVID-19 restrictions and containment measures. Interviews were semi-structured; data collection tools were developed to facilitate a level of standardization in data collected. However, the tools were used as guides and interviews were conducted in a participatory manner, guided by the participants' responses within the broader frame of the research questions. Interviews involved a mix of life history questions and questions focusing on knowledge, experience, behaviours and norms relating to child marriage, and the impacts of COVID-19 on these. This allowed the research to link demographic data (e.g., gender, age, ethnicity, socio-economic status, etc.) and data on participants' situational circumstances (level of education, livelihood, shelter, etc.), to particular perspectives and behaviours relating to the research questions.

Similar questions were asked of parents and caregivers, to capture their perspectives on the abovementioned issues.

2.3.2 Focus group discussions

A series of focus group discussions (FGDs) were carried out with adolescent boys and girls, caregivers and community members. These were conducted with groups of six to eight individuals of a similar age, who were separated according to gender. Focus groups provided a useful method for exploring prevalent individual and community attitudes and behaviours concerning child marriage, the aim of which was to help develop an in-depth and contextualized understanding of the operation and interplay between drivers and moderators of child marriage, and how they have been impacted by the COVID-19 context, particularly at the community level. Given the sensitivity of the topic, FGDs focus group discussions focused on exploring relevant issues (e.g., norms concerning young people's sexual behaviour and child marriage) in a general, hypothetical or scenario-based format, so that participants did not feel the need to reveal personal experiences in order to share their ideas. Discussion topics included general impacts of COVID-19 on communities, attitudes, knowledge and beliefs relating to child marriage (including appropriate age of marriage, reasons for marriage, decision-making, gender roles within marriage, etc.), and access to services within the community.

Participatory/adolescent-friendly methods in FGDs

Participatory exercises were used in the FGDs with adolescents, youth and parents/ caregivers. This was considered an effective way of achieving authentic and contextual insights into the impact of COVID-19 on the drivers and moderators of child marriage in a more relaxed and organic setting, to build trust and a rapport with respondents and to gain honest reactions and insights. These methods were developed to ensure that data collection tools did not reflect preconceived ideas about marriage in relation to children, their carers and their communities. Three exercises were used. First, an incomplete story/ Venn diagram was utilized, presenting incomplete vignettes about fictional children in their community encountering problems related to child marriage. Participants were asked to discuss solutions available to the child before, during and after COVID-19. Second, through word association exercises participants allocated qualities and attributes to married/ unmarried children, and a series of descriptions of life before and after COVID-19. Finally, through storytelling/ role-play exercises participants were asked to develop and act out a play based on how COVID-19 might have affected the situation of children in relation to marriage.[41]

[41] Inspiration for the development of these exercises was drawn from: The Global Women's Institute, "Gender-Based Violence Research, Monitoring, and Evaluation with Refugee and Conflict Affected Populations", The George Washington University, 2021, p. 56.

2.3.3 Key informant interviews

A number of key informant interviews were carried out with selected stakeholders with relevant experience, knowledge and insights. These were conducted in each country at the national and sub-national levels in each of the research areas, with the aim to gather expert insights and information about the broader context of child marriage and COVID-19 in each research site. Question schedules were developed to guide interviews, which were semi-structured in nature.

Data collection tools were piloted in one location in each country (Dhaka in Bangladesh; Tonk in India; Rautahat in Nepal) and were adjusted before data collection began.[42]

2.4 Sampling

2.4.1 Selection of research locations

The research aimed to examine how different drivers and moderators of child marriage function and interplay according to different contextual factors, and how they were impacted by COVID-19. For this reason, researchers aimed to ensure diversity in the selection of research sites. Sites were first selected according to the prevalence of child marriage. In each country, one district/town was selected where child marriage rates were relatively low, to assess the impact of COVID-19 on protective factors. The remaining 13 sites were selected on the basis of having higher child marriage rates than the national average. In India, the selection of districts was based on trend data, ensuring representation of districts with both increasing and decreasing rates of child marriage, as evidenced by comparing the 2015–2016 and 2019–2021 India National Family Health Survey (NFHS).[43]

Secondly, sites were selected to ensure wide variation in terms of geographical location (both rural and urban), level of wealth/deprivation, access to schools and labour markets, etc., as well as the prevalence of child marriage and the presence of COVID-19 restrictions.[44] Thirdly, practical considerations were also important and sites were selected where UNICEF and/or UNFPA had connections to implementing partners. This was important to ensure and programme relevance (i.e., the ability to operationalize recommendations within existing programmes) and access to research participants. The final site selection was decided in collaboration with UNICEF and UNFPA offices in each country *(see Figure 2)*. District-level data were used for selecting locations in Bangladesh[45] and India, however in Nepal[46] only provincial-level data were available.

Figure 2: Selection of research locations, based on prevalence data in relevant district/town.

Country	State/province	Districts/towns	Justification for selection
Bangladesh[47]	Rajshahi	Chapainawabganj	The highest child marriage rate in Bangladesh (72.9 per cent), above the province-wide rate of 66.7 per cent. The site has UNICEF-UNFPA programme relevance.
	Rangpur	Gaibandha	High child marriage rate (62.0 per cent), above the province-wide rate of 57.9 per cent. The site has UNICEF-UNFPA programme relevance.
	Khulna	Bagerhat	High child marriage rate (69.08 per cent), above the province-wide rate of 61.8 per cent. Cyclone disaster-prone area.[48] The site has UNICEF-UNFPA programme relevance.
	Sylhet	Sylhet City	The lowest child marriage rate in Bangladesh (25.5 per cent), which is lower than the province-wide prevalence rate of 31 per cent. Site has UNICEF programme relevance.

[42] The complete data collection tools are available online at: https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/r2ik2h94s8vxy1p5z8os0/Annex-A-Data-Collection-Tools.docx
[43] International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) and ICF, *National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4), 2015–16 India*, IIPS, Mumbai, 2017. https://dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/FR339/FR339.pdf; International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) and ICF. 2021. *National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), India, 2019–21*, IIPS, Mizoram, 2023.
[44] Communities that had recently experienced or are currently experiencing COVID-19 restrictions were included when possible.
[45] Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics and UNICEF Bangladesh, *Progotir Pathey, Bangladesh Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey, 2019*, Survey Findings Report. Dhaka, 2020.
[46] Government of Nepal National Planning Commission, Central Bureau of Statistics and UNICEF Nepal, *Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys Final Report 2019*, Kathmandu, 2020 <www.unicef.org/nepal/reports/multiple-indicator-cluster-survey-final-report-2019>
[47] Research locations in Bangladesh were selected based on MICS 2019 data, prior to the release of data from the 2022 Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey.
[48] Natural disasters, including cyclones, have been recognized as exacerbating the risk factors that drive child marriage *(see section 4.2.1.4)*.

Country	State/province	Districts/towns	Justification for selection
India[49]	Assam	Cachar	Mid-range child marriage rate; steep increase (from 16.9 per cent to 29.9 per cent).
		Hailakandi	Mid-range child marriage rates; steep increase (from 22.9 per cent to 32.9 per cent).
	Bihar	Sheikhpura	High child marriage rates; slight decrease (from 50.8 per cent to 46.1 per cent).
		Purnea	High child marriage rates; steep increase (from 39 per cent to 51.2 per cent).
	Odisha	Gajapati	Mid-range child marriage rates; small increase (from 25.3 per cent to 28.1 per cent).
		Nabarangpur	Mid-high child marriage; small increase (from 37.9 per cent to 39.4 per cent).
	Rajasthan	Sawai Madhopur	Mid-high child marriage rates, large decrease (from 47.7 per cent to 35.4 per cent).
		Udaipur	Low-mid child marriage rates; large decrease (from 40.4 per cent to 18.2 per cent).
Nepal[50]	Madhesh	Rautahat	Province with the highest rate of child marriage in the country according to 2019 MICS data (46 per cent of women aged 20-24 years currently married), with strong urban/rural discrepancy (22.1 per cent versus 31.5 per cent).[51] Due to a lack of disaggregated local-level data, specific locations were selected in consultation with UNICEF and UNFPA.
		Dhanusha	
	Karnali	Kalikot	Province with the second highest rate of child marriage in the country according to 2019 MICS data (44.3 per cent aged 20-24 years currently married).[52] Due to a lack of disaggregated local-level data, specific locations were selected in consultation with UNICEF and UNFPA.
		Surkhet	

2.4.2 Selection of research participants

Key informants were selected utilizing a purposive sampling technique with participants identified strategically to ensure relevance to the research questions. They included key stakeholders within communities (including teachers and health professionals); community-based organizations and non-governmental organization (NGO) staff and relevant leaders and policymakers, including community leaders, religious leaders and government officials.

The sampled adolescent, youth, parent/caregiver and community member participants included young women and girls (as well as young men and boys) who had been married as children, particularly those who married during the COVID-19 pandemic. Sampling was done according to a maximum variation sampling strategy, with the aim of achieving diversity across a range of variables, including wealth, livelihoods, geography, education, religion and ethnicity. Efforts were made to ensure (where possible) representation of children who had been in arranged marriages and self-initiated marriages *(see section 1.4)*. In total 163 individual interviews, 128 focus group discussions and 99 key informant interviews were carried out.[53]

[49] Increases and decreases in child marriage rates refer to a comparison between the 2015–2016 and 2019–2021 India NFHS, using the district fact sheets. These are available at: https://dhsprogram.com/publications/publication-OF43-Other-Fact-Sheets.cfm.

[50] District-level data are unavailable for Nepal, so provincial data has been used. Districts were selected in consultation with UNICEF Nepal, taking into consideration the aforementioned selection criteria.

[51] According to the MICS 2019, in Madhesh province 24.9 per cent of adolescent girls aged 15–19 were currently married.

[52] According to the MICS 2019, in Karnali province 27.4 per cent of adolescent girls aged 15–19 were currently married.

[53] A list of participants is available at: https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/k2gfl80h73gzqjgede7u4/Annex-B-Participant-List.docx

Figure 3: Interviews and focus group discussions conducted in each country.

Country	Individual interviews	Key informant interviews	Focus group discussions
Bangladesh	40	30	32
India	79	42	67
Nepal	44	27	29
Total	163	99	128

2.5 Data analysis

All qualitative data were transcribed and uploaded into MAXQDA qualitative data analysis software. The analysis included a systematic review of each transcript to identify key themes, patterns, discourses, relationships and explanations relevant to the research questions. The analysis aimed to situate the data findings in their broader religious and cultural contexts and engage strong human rights and gender perspectives. A thematic analysis was conducted in MAXQDA using a coding tree to better understand themes and trends around the drivers and mediators of child marriage as identified in the desk review and outlined in the conceptual framework *(see section 2.1)*. During this process, new themes were identified and incorporated into the analytic model. Data were analysed to identify themes across the region while also taking into account key differences between the three countries and locations within each country.

2.6 Ethics

The research was guided by a comprehensive ethical protocol, which was then tailored to the specific context in each country.[54] The study, including the ethical protocol and data collection tools, were submitted to Coram's Research Ethics Committee[55] for review. Following a favourable outcome from this review process, the methodology, data collection tools and ethical protocol and tools were submitted to national review boards in Bangladesh and Nepal (in India, no national government ethical review processes was required).[56]

[54] The ethical protocols and tools used for this study are available here: https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/z9oov4zof9s0qluixjxuc/Annex-C-Ethical-Protocol.docx

[55] A committee of seven members consisting of three Coram trustees, two lay members (current or recent service user or practitioner experience) and two external academics, together with two other members from Coram's Impact and Evaluation Team as secretariat. The committee reports to Coram's Children's Services Committee which is a sub-committee of Coram's board of trustees. The role of the committee is to provide opinions on the ethics of specific projects. It is governed by principles of balance and independence, quality and proportionality, participation and teamwork, transparency and confidentiality and accountability.

[56] In Bangladesh, any evidence-generation activity that collects data on or interacts with human subjects, is required to go through a national Institutional Review Board. Any board needs to be recognized by the Government of Bangladesh as a credible institution for ethics reviews. Accordingly, the research team completed a review process with the Institute of Health Economics, which approved the application. In Nepal, there is a government national review process for research and an application was accordingly submitted and later approved by the Nepal Health Research Council.

2.7 Limitations and mitigation

Researchers faced several challenges and limitations during the data collection phase of the study, some of which had implications for how data was analysed and interpreted. The key challenges are discussed here, along with the mitigation strategies used.

- **Accessing participants was at times challenging**, primarily owing to the sensitivity of the subject matter. Adolescents and youth who married as children and their families were at times apprehensive about participating in the research, owing to a real or perceived fear of potential legal or social repercussions. To mitigate against this risk, the research team emphasized to children and families, particularly girls and women, that no responses would attributed to individuals in the research report. As is standard practice, each participant was provided with a participant information sheet outlining the research team's approach to confidentiality, consent, anonymity and data protection before being asked to consent to the research. In several locations, data collection clashed with exam periods and working hours which particularly limited the participation of boys/men in the research. It also meant that, at times, participants were quite tired and less engaged in the FGDs.

- **The sensitivity of the subject matter** may have limited the extent to which participants felt able to share information; participants appeared at times to be reluctant to share personal ideas and experiences in relation to child marriage. These limitations were amplified when exploring such themes with adolescent girls and young people, given the taboos typically associated with pre-marital adolescent sexual activity. Teenage participants may have been concerned for their privacy and safety or felt that there were "socially acceptable" ways of thinking and behaving in relation to these issues. This may have been a particular issue in FGDs, as participants were grouped with other members of their community, and may have been more likely to self-regulate their responses, or give answers that were more reflective of those expressed by their peers (i.e., responses may have been impacted by social desirability bias). These ideas may have been further influenced by respondents' perceptions of the researcher as an associate of an NGO, with a particular "agenda" or view on these issues.[57] As such, research methods and tools were designed to adhere to strict ethical principles and procedures, and to facilitate the collection of authentic, spontaneous data, resulting in rich data, inclusive of subtle or hidden insights. FGDs focused on community-wide attitudes and practices, and included scenario-based and hypothetical questions. The research was carried out in a safe space away from the homes of participants (e.g., an NGO office or community building) in each research location and participants were supported to attend the location.

- **Research findings may have been influenced by reporting bias and recall bias**. Participants were recruited through NGO implementing partners, which may have caused some bias in the sample toward adolescents and parents/caregivers who had accessed services or been involved in empowerment programmes or awareness raising concerning child marriage. The researchers were careful to interpret the data in this light. In addition, professional stakeholders may have been keen to selectively reveal or suppress information, hoping to "look good" rather than present the realities of their work. Children and families, particularly those who have had traumatic or stressful experiences, may inaccurately recollect memories or experiences or omit details during interviews. To mitigate against these risks, the research team reminded all interviewees of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses prior to the research, in order to encourage honest and transparent responses. Effort also went into carefully constructing interview tools so as to minimize the risk of recall bias and/or traumatization for children and families (e.g., through the use of hypothetical scenarios).

[57] Research participants were accessed through NGO implementing partners and in several research locations, the working relationships that NGO partners had with government service providers (school principals, social welfare workers, police, etc.) may have resulted in participants feeling unable to share personal information, particularly where they had undergone child marriage in contravention of national laws.

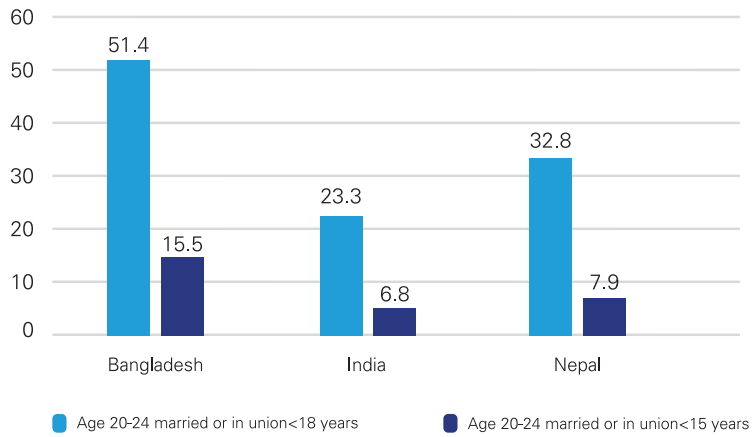
03
Context: Child marriage and COVID-19 in Bangladesh, India and Nepal

3.1 Child marriage in South Asia

South Asia is home to approximately 290 million child brides, accounting for 45 per cent of the global total.[58] Recent data on child marriage prevalence, from the 2019 Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) for Bangladesh and Nepal, and the 2019 NFHS for India, show that prevalence of child marriage differs considerably in these countries *(see Figure 4).*

In Bangladesh, over half (51.4 per cent) of girls are married before the age of 18 years, compared to 32.8 per cent in Nepal and 23.3 per cent in India. Additionally, 15.5 per cent of girls are married before the age of 15 years in Bangladesh, compared to 7.9 per cent in Nepal and 6.8 per cent in India (however, note that under-15 figures for India are drawn from the earlier 2016 NFHS report).

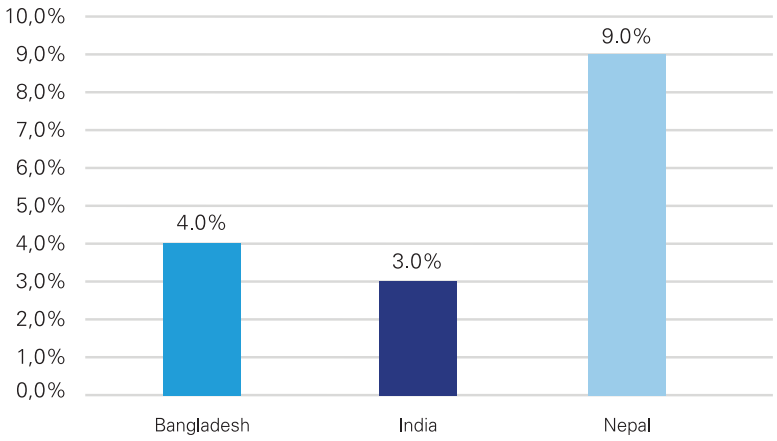
Figure 4: Percentage of girls aged 20–24 years married or in a union before the ages of 18 and 15.



Source: Bangladesh, MICS 2019; India, NFHS, 2016 (<15) and NFHS-5, 2019–2021 (<18); Nepal, MICS, 2019 (Data from UNICEF Data Warehouse and drawn from NFHS-5 report). Under-15 figures for India are drawn from the earlier 2016 report.

[58] UNICEF, *A Profile of Child Marriage in South Asia.*

Figure 5: Percentage of men aged 20–24 years married or in a union before the age of 18.



Source: UNICEF, *A profile of child marriage in South Asia*, 2023, p. 11.

Less data are available regarding boys in child marriages, though the sources that exist indicate that the prevalence of child marriage is substantially lower for males. Nine per cent of boys are married before the age of 18 years in Nepal, compared to four per cent in Bangladesh and three per cent in India.[59]

3.2 Child marriage and contextual factors in research locations

3.2.1 India

The rates of child marriage among girls under the age of 18 in India halved from 54 per cent in 1992 to 23.3 per cent in 2019–2021, representing among the strongest rates of progress in reducing child marriage prevalence in South Asia. Even so, child marriage prevalence remains high.

According to 2022 data, there are 216.6 million child brides in India, representing one-third of the global total, making it the country with the largest population of child brides.[60] It is important to note that the country's total number of child brides includes many women who married decades ago and who are now adults.

[59] UNICEF, *A Profile of Child Marriage in South Asia.*
[60] United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA Global Programme to End Child Marriage, *India Country Profile*, 2022, <https://data.unicef.org/resources/child-marriage-country-profiles/>

Figure 6: Percentage of women aged 20–24 years who were married before the age of 18 in research locations in India.

State	Prevalence rate
Assam	31.8%
Bihar	40.8%
Odisha	20.5%
Rajasthan	25.4%

Source: NFHS-5, 2019–2021

Assam is located in north-eastern India, south of the eastern Himalayas along the Brahmaputra and Barak River valleys. The majority of the population in Assam is Hindu, while one-third is Muslim. Most people live in rural areas, but its distribution is uneven due to hilly terrains, numerous rivers, extensive forests, limited cultivable land and lack of industrial development.[61] Since the region's landscape is characterized by hills, valleys and floodplains, it is vulnerable to floods, landslides and earthquakes.[62] In such areas, families may face increased economic hardship and social disruption as a result of environmental shocks. In addition, limited cultivable land and lack of industrial development contribute to poverty and economic instability which, as noted earlier, increases the likelihood of child marriage as a coping mechanism. Assam is characterized by a history of large migration flows from neighbouring Bangladesh, a trend that continues to this day.[63] Assam also has the country's highest school dropout rate of 31 per cent, leaving girls at greater risk of child marriage and limiting their opportunities for empowerment. The percentage of women married before the age of 18 years in Assam is almost 32 per cent.[64] The study covered two districts: **Cachar** and **Hailakandi**. Both locations have experienced steep increases in child marriage. In Cachar, the rate of women aged 20–24 years married before the age of 18 increased from 16.9 per cent in 2015–2016 to 29.9 per cent in 2019–2021, while in Hailakandi the rate increased from 22.9 per cent to 32.9 per cent.[65]

Bihar is a state in eastern India, and shares a border with Nepal and the Indian states of West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh. It is among the most densely populated states of India.

The vast majority of the population lives in rural areas in clustered villages. Hindus constitute the majority of the population, followed by Muslims.[66] About 40.8 per cent of women in Bihar were married before the age of 18 years, positioning it as one of the states with the highest prevalence of child marriage in the country.[67] The study covered two districts of Bihar: **Sheikhpura** and **Purnea**. Sheikhpura, a small district with 80 per cent of the population living in rural areas, lies in the southern part of Bihar, almost 120 km from the state capital. Purnea lies in the northeast part of the state, on the border of West Bengal. It is an emerging urban agglomeration due to its large size, vicinity to other states and industrial interface. In Purnea, data from 2019–2020 show that the rate of women aged 20–24 years and married before the age of 18 was 51.2 per cent, while in Sheikhpura it was 46.1 per cent.[68]

Odisha is located in the north-eastern part of India, bordering the states of Jharkhand and West Bengal to the north, Chhattisgarh to the west and Andhra Pradesh to the south. The state is vulnerable to natural disasters; during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown, the state was hit by two cyclones. The main religion is Hinduism, followed by Islam. Most of the population lives in rural hilly areas. The study covered two districts of Odisha: Gajapati and Nabarangpur. Odisha saw a decline in the percentage of women aged 20–24 years who were married before the age of 18, from 21.3 per cent in 2015–2016 to 20.5 per cent in 2019–2021.[69] However, in the districts covered by the research, there was a slight increase in child marriage during the same time period: in Gajapati from 25.3 per cent to 28 per cent, and in Nabarangpur from 37.9 per cent to 39.4 per cent.[70]

Rajasthan is a state in northern India bordered by Pakistan and the Indian states of Punjab, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Haryana. One-tenth of the population live in tribal communities. The main religion is Hinduism, followed by Islam. The study covered two districts: **Sawai Madhopur** and **Udaipur.** Rajasthan saw a decline in the percentage of girls married before the age of 18, from 35 per cent in 2015–2016 to 25 per cent in 2019–2021.[71] The same trend can be observed in the districts covered by the project: Udaipur experienced a decrease from 40.4 per cent to 18.2 per cent, and Sawai Madhopur from 47.7 per cent to 35.4 per cent.[72]

[61] Das, H. and Lodrick, D.O., "Assam", *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 5 November 2024, <www.britannica.com/place/Assam>, accessed 6 November 2024.
[62] Assam State Disaster Management Authority, "Hazard and Vulnerability Profile", <http://asdma.gov.in/hazardous.html>, accessed 5 November 2024.
[63] Narzary, M. and Devi, M., "Trends and patterns of migration in Assam: Its inflows and outflows", *Journal of Positive School Psychology* 6(5), pp. 184–192, 2022.
[64] Kapoor A., and Green M., Social Progress Index: States and Districts of India, 2022 <https://eacpm.gov.in/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Social_Progress_Index_States_and_Districts_of_India.pdf>
[65] NFHS-5 2019–2021.
[66] Dutt, A.K. , Noble, A.G. and Dayal, P., "Bihar", *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 5 November 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Bihar> Accessed 6 November 2024.
[67] Kapoor A., and Green M., *Social Progress Index: States and Districts of India*, 2022 <https://eacpm.gov.in/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Social_Progress_Index_States_and_Districts_of_India.pdf>
[68] NFHS-5 2019–2021.
[69] Kapoor A., and Green M., *Social Progress Index*.
[70] NFHS-5 2019–2021.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Ibid.

3.2.2 Bangladesh

The prevalence of marriage before the age of 18 years among girls in Bangladesh has decreased from over 90 per cent around 1970 to 50.1 per cent in 2019.[73] Despite this, Bangladesh has the highest prevalence of child marriage in the region.

Figure 7: Percentage of women aged 20–24 years married before the age of 18 in research locations in Bangladesh.

Division	Prevalence rate
Khulna	61.8%
Rajshahi	66.7%
Rangpur	57.9%
Sylhet	31.0%

Source: Bangladesh MICS 2019.

Rajshahi is located in the northwest of Bangladesh, bordering India, and consists of flat plains, with some areas covered by forest. The majority of the population are Muslim. In Rajshahi, the percentage of women aged 20–24 years and married before the age of 18 was 66.7 per cent in 2019.[74] The study covered the district of **Chapainawabganj** where the rate of child marriage was the highest in Bangladesh in 2019, at 73 per cent.[75]

Rangpur is located in the northwest of Bangladesh, bordering India. The majority of the population are Muslim, while 12 per cent are Hindu. In Rangpur, the percentage of women aged 20–24 years married before the age of 18 was 57.9 per cent in 2019.[76] The research covered the district of **Gaibandha** which had a high rate of child marriage at 62 per cent in 2019.

Khulna is located in the southwest of Bangladesh and is the second largest division in the country. It is an important river port and a produce collection and trade centre. Due to its coastal location, it is vulnerable to natural disasters such as cyclones, storm surges, floods and tidal waves. In 2019, 61.8 per cent of women aged 20–24 years were married before the age of 18.

The study covered the district of **Bagerhat** where the rate of child marriage was 70 per cent in 2019.[77]

Sylhet is the north-eastern division of Bangladesh, bordering India to the north, east and south, and the Bangladeshi divisions of Chittagong to the southwest and Dhaka and Mymensingh to the west. Islam is the main religion, followed by Hinduism. The percentage of women aged 20–24 years who were married before the age of 18 was 31 per cent in 2019.[78] The study covered the district of **Sylhet** where the proportion of women aged 20–24 years married before the age of 18 was 52 per cent.

3.2.3 Nepal

Consistent with other countries in South Asia, Nepal has experienced a decline in child marriage during the last two decades, though it still has the second highest rate in South Asia, behind Bangladesh. According to the latest available data, from 2019, 32.8 per cent of girls were married before the age of 18 and 7.9 per cent before the age of 15.[79]

Figure 8: Percentage of girls married before the age of 18 in research locations, Nepal.

Province	Prevalence rate
Karnali	44%
Madhesh	46%

Source: Nepal, MICS 2019.

Madhesh is a province located in the south-eastern region of Nepal, along the border with India. It is the most populated province in Nepal, but also the smallest province by area. The Madheshi people, who live in this region, have a distinct culture, language and history. The majority of the population are Hindu, with a Muslim minority. It has among the highest rates of child marriage in Nepal: 46 per cent of women aged 20–24 were married before the age of 18 in 2019, while 14.2 per cent were married before the age of 15.[80] The study covered the districts of **Rautahat** and **Dhanusha**.

[73] Bangladesh MICS 2019.
[74] Ibid.
[75] UNICEF, *A Profile of Child Marriage in South Asia.*
[76] Bangladesh MICS 2019.
[77] UNICEF, *A Profile of Child Marriage in South Asia.*
[78] Bangladesh MICS 2019.
[79] The source of data for this study is the Nepal MICS 2019. The latest NDHS (2022) data reveal a slight increase in prevalence of child marriage under 18 years from 33 per cent (2019) to 35 per cent (2022) among women aged 20–24 years, whereas the proportion of child marriage before 15 years has declined from 7 per cent (2019) to 6 per cent (2022).
[80] Nepal MICS 2019.

Karnali is located in the far west of Nepal. Although geographically the largest province in Nepal, it has the lowest population. The region is vulnerable to flooding and landslides.[81] The majority of the population are Hindu followed by a smaller proportion of Buddhists. In Karnali, the percentage of women aged 20–24 years who were married before the age of 18 was 44.3 per cent while 12 per cent were married before the age of 15.[82] The study covered the districts of **Kalikot** and **Surkhet.**

3.3 COVID-19 impacts

In South Asia, the initial response to the COVID-19 outbreak was to impose national lockdowns, border restrictions and the immediate closure of businesses and schools. Despite such precautions being taken to limit the transmission of COVID-19, the virus still spread in the region *(see Figure 9)*. Among the three countries under study, the overwhelming majority of recorded cases and deaths were in India.

Figure 9: Cumulative cases of COVID-19 and associated deaths in research locations.

Country	Cumulative cases	Cumulative deaths	State/ Division	Cumulative cases	Mortality rate	District	Cumulative cases
Bangladesh	**2,037,829**	**29,445**	Khulna	115,821	5.68%	Bagerhat	7,741
			Sylhet	69,142	3.39%	Sylhet City	38,315
			Rajshahi	123,669	6.07%	Chapainawabganj	5,647
			Rangpur	60,630	2.98%	Gaibandha	5,186
India	**44,686,371**	**530,771**	Assam	746,138	1.67%	Cachar	-
						Hailakandi	
			Bihar	855,054	1.91%	Sheikhpura	-
						Purnea	
			Odisha	1,347,888	3.02%	Gajapati	-
						Nabarangpur	
			Rajasthan	1,326,338	2.97%	Sawai Madhopur	-
						Udaipur	
Nepal	**1,001,145**	**12,020**	Karnali	24,023	2.40%	Surkhet	12,778
						Kalikot	939
			Madhesh	53,894	5.38%	Rautahat	5,217
						Dhanusha	11,444

Source: National level data: World Health Organization (WHO), WHO COVID-19 Dashboard, <https://data.who.int/dashboards/covid19>;
Sub-national data: Nepal <https://covid19.mohp.gov.np>; Bangladesh <https://dashboard.dghs.gov.bd/pages/covid19.php>; India < https://www.mohfw.gov. in>.

[81] Asia Development Bank and Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, "Disaster displacement: Nepal country briefing (December 2022)", ReliefWeb 2022, <https://reliefweb.int/report/nepal/disaster-displacement-nepal-country-briefing-december-2022>.
[82] Nepal MICS 2019.

The spread of the disease and the closure of businesses saw the overburdening of health-care services and the loss of livelihoods, while food and resource shortages became commonplace. It has been several years since lockdowns and restrictions were initially imposed, though many families are still struggling, with the loss of their sources of livelihood leaving them unable to provide for their families. As families and caregivers were placed in more precarious positions due to the aftershocks of the pandemic, children have become increasingly vulnerable to harmful practices, including child labour, human trafficking and child marriage.[83] As such, in some cases, children have been forced to work to support their families or have been married at a young age to reduce their families' financial burden.

The following sections briefly explore the different ways that the pandemic impacted children and communities in Bangladesh, India and Nepal.

Disruption to education

Among the most detrimental impacts of the pandemic on children was the closure of schools. Between April 2020 and March 2022, schools were fully or partially closed for 83 per cent of the time, impacting 434 million students in South Asia. As a consequence, learning poverty (defined as 10-year-olds who cannot read or understand a simple text) increased from 60 per cent to 78 per cent in the region.[84]

School closures were very disruptive to children's education, as many did not have the resources or support to be able to continue their education effectively through remote learning. As such, inequalities and gaps in learning and school-based support widened. The share of households with a stable internet connection in 2019 was 53 per cent in urban and 33 per cent in rural areas in Bangladesh; 65 per cent in urban and 41 per cent in rural areas in India; and 59 per cent in urban areas and 34 per cent in rural areas in Nepal.[85] The lack of financial means coupled with the lack of access to education led to higher rates of children dropping out of school. UNESCO in South Asia estimated that 1.3 per cent of girls and 1.4 per cent of boys were at risk of not returning or delaying their return to school. Girls were more likely to discontinue their education in these circumstances; a factor which has been linked to the increased rate of child marriage seen in recent years.[86] According to UNICEF estimates, globally, the closure of schools may have increased the risk of child marriage by 25 per cent per year. [87]

Schools play a key role in child protection. Teachers, health-care workers and other service providers whom children come into contact with at school are crucial in identifying and reporting instances of abuse or neglect, and identifying prolonged school absences as risks for child marriage and child labour. The pandemic prohibited this contact and removed children from protective social networks, meaning there were fewer opportunities to detect child protection risks, including child marriage, particularly given the lack of access to remote education for many due to a lack of IT resources and internet connectivity.[88]

Economic downturn

The economic fallout from the pandemic led to a greater financial burden being placed on families.[89] Lockdowns and quarantine measures saw businesses, factories and other workplaces shut down for extended periods, with extremely negative impacts on the economies of countries in South Asia.[90] The financial cost of closures and the drop in economic activity meant that the incomes of many households fell significantly. An early study found that, in the first two months of the pandemic in Bangladesh, there was a reported 62–75 per cent drop in income and a 28 per cent drop in consumption expenditures.[91] This had a particularly severe impact on households already living in poverty, and those dependent on remittances and income from migrant workers. This loss of income, paired with sickness or deaths within families and rising costs due to trade and production delays, caused substantial economic insecurity and poverty for households across South Asia.[92]

Economic insecurity – be it due to conflict, food crises or other disasters – can drive child marriage as a way to relieve financial pressures on a family.[93] The pandemic's economic fallout meant that parents were more likely to turn to child marriage as a coping trategy as they could no longer afford to provide for their children.[94] Parents reportedly turned to child marriage to alleviate financial pressures on their households and, in the case of girls, to secure their daughters' financial futures.[95]

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[83] World Vision, *COVID-19 and Child Marriage.*
[84] Schady, N., Alaka H., Shwetlena S., Joana S. and Andres Yi C., *Collapse and Recovery: How the COVID-19 pandemic eroded human capital and what to do about it, World Bank, Washington, DC, 2023.*
[85] United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), *Responding Today for Tomorrow: South Asia.* UNICEF South Asia. Kathmandu, 2023.
[86] Paul P., Mondal D., "Child Marriage in India: A human rights violation during the COVID-19 pandemic", *Asia Pacific Journal of Public Health,* 33(1), pp. 162–163, 2021.
[87] United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), *COVID-19: A threat to progress against child marriage,* UNICEF, New York, 2021.
[88] World Vision, 2021. *COVID-19 and Child Marriage.*
[89] Paul P., Mondal D., "Child Marriage in India".
[90] India and Nepal posted negative GDP growth in 2020, of-6.6 per cent and-2.4 per cent respectively. While Bangladesh did not have negative growth, it nevertheless had slow growth. It is assumed that reliance on agriculture had a role in avoiding negative growth in Bangladesh.
[91] Makino M., Shonchoy A.S., and Wahhaj. Z., "Early effects of the COVID-19 lockdown on children in rural Bangladesh", Discussion Paper, University of Kent School of Economics, January 2021.
[92] Melnikas A.J. et al, More Than Brides Alliance: Endline Evaluation Report 2016–2020, New York Population Council, 2021.
[93] UNICEF, COVID-19: *A Threat to Progress against Child Marriage.*
[94] World Vision, *COVID-19 and Child Marriage.*
[95] Melnikas A.J. et al, "More Than Brides Alliance".

Disruption in availability and access to services

The pandemic also resulted in delays and stoppages to crucial interventions and response programmes that aim to tackle child protection issues, such as referring complaints received through child helplines to frontline support, other reporting mechanisms and child protection case management services.[96] Quarantine measures and social distancing rules made physical access to such services challenging. Additionally, the inability of service providers to actively engage with communities resulted in limited case identification and referral to services. Furthermore, the economic impacts of the pandemic curtailed funding for services and restricted the capacity of service providers. For example, in India, government cash transfer schemes have historically been used to mitigate income deprivation and thus delay the need to marry a child. The pandemic compromised such programmes, due to "limitations in service delivery and immediate cash and in-kind needs of adolescent girls and their families."[97]

In addition to social welfare and child protection programmes, health-care service delivery was also heavily impacted. As financial and physical resources, as well as human capacity, were directed towards COVID-19 response, services deemed non-essential were curtailed.[98] Most relevant to child marriage was the reduction in reproductive health services, as well as fewer opportunities for health-care service providers to identify and report suspected cases of child abuse, neglect or child pregnancy.[99] The pandemic also caused delays in justice system processes, creating greater barriers to children's access to legal response mechanisms aimed at preventing child marriage and addressing other protection risks.[100]

Gender dynamics

The impacts of COVID-19 disproportionately affected women and girls due to pre-existing gender inequalities, economic vulnerabilities and harmful social norms.[101] Across the globe, women earn less, hold less secure jobs and are more likely to be employed in the informal sector with limited access to social protection.[102] In South Asia, over 80 per cent of women in non-agricultural jobs are in informal employment.[103] The safety measures taken to limit the spread of COVID-19 disrupted economic activities and especially impacted informal sector workers with vulnerable employment and minimal social safety nets. This had a significant impact on women's ability to earn a living, particularly in informal sectors.[104]

[96] Yukich J., et al, *"Projecting the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on child marriage", Journal of Adolescent Health, volume 69, issue 6, 2021.UNICEFUNICEF, COVID-19: A threat to progress against child marriage.*
[97] Ibid.
[98] However, it is noted that, in Bangladesh, the COVID-19 context helped build momentum for UNICEF's efforts to strengthen the child protection and social welfare system, through advocating for the critical needs for such services.
[99] Yukich J., et al, "Projecting the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on child marriage".
[100] UNICEF, *COVID-19: A threat to progress against child marriage.*
[101] United Nations, "Policy Brief: The impact of COVID-19 on women", 9 April 2020, <https://unsdg.un.org/resources/policy-brief-impact-covid-19-women>
[102] Ibid.
[103] Ibid.
[104] Gurol, G.Y. and Luchsinger, G., "Overview: In South Asia, COVID-19 deepens gender disparities", UN Women, <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/news-and-events/stories/2021/07/covid-19-deepens-gender-disparities>, accessed 5 November 2024.

04 Findings

4.1 Impacts of COVID-19 on types of child marriage

Common forms of marriage in South Asia

Child marriage in South Asia can take a number of different forms, including forced or arranged marriages, whereby a family member or another adult arranges the marriage, with or without the child's consent;[105] and self-initiated marriage, where the decision is led by the child, with or without their parents' approval. Polygamous marriages (where a man has multiple wives) are also increasing in Bangladesh, India and Nepal.[106] While research from prior to COVID-19 indicates that arranged marriages are the predominant form of marriage across South Asia,[107] there was evidence of an increase in self-initiated marriages in Bangladesh, India and Nepal prior to the pandemic.[108]

As a qualitative study, this research cannot quantify trends in terms of child marriage rates or types. Nevertheless, its findings provide insights into community perceptions on marriage rates, common types of marriage and attitudes towards the different types of marriage during and following COVID-19. Research participants provided many examples of self-initiated marriage, although arranged marriages appear to be more common across most research locations. There were also examples of polygamous marriage provided by participants in some Muslim communities, but these were rare.[109] This section provides an overarching description of types of marriage and a broad overview of the contexts and circumstances surrounding these types of marriage across the research locations.

4.1.1 Perceived changes in child marriage rates during COVID-19

There were mixed perceptions among research participants concerning how marriage rates had changed as a result of COVID-19, although the general consensus in all research locations was that child marriage had increased during COVID-19. This was both in the case for self-initiated marriages and arranged marriages. However, across locations, instances were reported where COVID-19 had led to a delay in child marriages that had been arranged prior to the pandemic, perceptions that COVID-19 had not led to a change in marriage rates, or had led to a decrease in child marriage rates. The perceived decrease in child marriage rates was particularly prominent in national-level KIIs in Bangladesh.[110] Where individuals highlighted reductions in child marriage during COVID-19, they primarily cited reasons such as being unable to hold or afford marriage ceremonies. These protective factors are examined in further detail throughout this report.

4.1.2 Types of marriage during COVID-19

In the present study and across all research locations, self- initiated marriages were consistently reported to

[105] Adolescent consent to child marriage should be considered within the concept of evolving capacities. There may be certain circumstances where an adolescent is able to give consent to a marriage (for example, if they are financially independent). However, it must be noted that a child's ability to provide meaningful consent to a marriage is likely to be very constrained, given their dependence on parents / adult caregivers, particularly within contexts in which arranged marriages are normalized.

[106] United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), *Child Marriage and Other Harmful Practices: A desk review of evidence from South Asia,* UNFPA & UNICEF Bangkok, 2020.

[107] UNICEF and UNFPA, *Child Marriage in South Asia: An evidence review*; University of Dhaka Department of Population Sciences, Context of Child Marriage and its Implications in Bangladesh, UNFPA and University of Dhaka, Dhaka, 2017.

[108] Johns Hopkins University, Women's Refugee Commission, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), *Child Marriage in Humanitarian Settings in South Asia: Study results from Bangladesh and Nepal, UNFPA and UNICEF, 2020; UNICEF and UNFPA, Child Marriage in South Asia: An evidence review; United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the Department of Population Studies, Situation Assessment of Child Marriage in Selected Five Intervention Districts of Nepal,* 2017.

[109] Individual interview with parent/caregiver of married child, female, 40 years, Hailakandi, Assam, India, 14 November 2022.

[110] For example: KII with UNFPA Adolescent and Youth Programme Manager, 7 December 2022.

have increased during COVID-19 as a result of increased social media use, the desire to escape increased stress in family homes and disrupted education, resulting in more time for social interaction between children *(see section 4.2)*. However, the majority of respondents reported that arranged marriages continued to be the most common form of child marriage. Additionally, what is labelled as a self-initiated marriage often involves complex dynamics that indicate a level of arrangement in these situations.

Several modalities of arranged marriages were identified in this study. It was most common that a groom's family would approach the bride's family with a proposal. In some instances, children knew, or had met, their partner before marriage, whereas in other instances girls were unable to meet their future husband before the wedding.

"For my marriage, the boy was selected by my ***bhua*** [aunty] and my parents decided that I should get married. [The] marriage took place at my house. My husband is two years older than me. ***Dahej*** [dowry] was taken by my in-laws, [which included a] bike and 110,000 rupees, clothes [and] jewelry… My husband stayed with me for two years during COVID [before he migrated]. The decision [to marry] was not mine. I did not even see the boy before marriage."

- A married adolescent, girl, 17 years, Sheikhpura, Bihar, India, 14 November 2022.

Arranged marriages can also take the form of a marriage exchange: the son and daughter of one family marry the son and daughter of another family, but the sons remain in their homes and the girls move to live with their in-laws. This exchange is often in lieu of exchanging a dowry. Another form of child marriage that is not uncommon in South Asia is consanguineous marriage, the marriage of two people who are closely related, such as cousins. In the present study, a few examples of consanguineous marriages were provided,[111] but this was not reported as a common practice in research communities.

It was common for participants to report that girls are not asked whether they would like to marry a boy or man chosen by the parents; rather, they are informed and are not given any choice but are expected to accept the marriage and say "yes" if they are asked. While many girls reported that marriages are forced, parents did not regard these as forced marriage,[112] even when acknowledging a girl cannot say no to a proposal. For example, in Rautahat (Madhesh, Nepal), mothers reported that a marriage would be cancelled if the girl did not consent,[113] whereas fathers reported incidents of forced marriage,[114] and girls reported that it is common for parents to force a marriage against girls' wishes.[115] Often, parents also justified forced marriage as a necessary preventative measure for, or response to, the prospect of a self-initiated marriage.

> "Actually, girls never deny the decision of their parents here, so there are no cases of forced marriages here. There are maybe one or two cases, but not many... There was a case when a girl ran away [to elope] and on her return to home, her parents forced her to marry another man. Yes, one girl was left by a boy whom she ran away with. She was found by her parents and they got her married."
>
> - FGD with adolescents and youth, female, 12–21 years, Purnea, Bihar, India, 16 November 2022.

Several types of self-initiated marriages were identified in the study, including elopement, self-initiated marriages that are accepted by both sets of parents, romantic relationships that turn into arranged marriages and marriages described as "love marriages" which involve a degree of coercion of the girl.

It was commonly reported that COVID-19 led to an increase in elopements, because more children were running away to get married without their parents' knowledge or approval.

> "My daughter married when she was 13. Her husband was 23 years old then. We rented out a few flats and one of the tenant's boyfriends introduced his friend to my daughter. They talked a lot and fell in love. The boy is horrible. He is an alcoholic and is always doing drugs. He lured my daughter by telling her that he has a business and earns a lot. She is fair, slim and beautiful so he wanted to have a relationship with her. They ran away and got married because we were against it. She was only 13 years old... She now regrets her decision and wants to study again. She realizes the impact all of this has had on her health and her mental state. If I could go back in time, I would have done more to stop her from marrying this boy. I should have gone to the police back then, but I didn't because the in-laws promised that they would allow her to study."
>
> - A parent/ caregiver of a married child, female, 47 years, Cachar, Assam, India, 24 November 2022.

Participants commonly expressed the belief that girls did not play an active role in an elopement, or had been coerced or forced to elope by their husbands. However, the narrative provided by boys who eloped tended to be that their wives also wanted to get married. In some marriages described as self-initiated, boys chose a wife out of a sense of duty to benefit the family, with little mention of love. [116]

In some cases, it was clear that what was regarded as a self-initiated marriage involved a more complex dynamic, including some degree of pressure placed on girls. There were instances where what would be considered an elopement from the perspective of a girl's family was regarded as an arranged or supported self-initiated marriage from the perspective of the boy's family. There were also examples of boys convincing girls to elope as a result of pressure from the boy's parents to marry.

[111] For example: individual interview with married adolescent, female, 17 years, Chapainawabganj, Rajshahi, Bangladesh, 20 November 2022.
[112] For example: FGD with parents/caregivers, female, Rautahat, Madhesh Province, Nepal, 2 December 2022.
[113] FGD with parents/caregivers, female, Rautahat, Madhesh Province, Nepal, 4 December 2022.
[114] For example: FGD with parents/caregivers, male, Rautahat, Madhesh Province, Nepal, 5 December 2022.
[115] For example: FGD with adolescents, female, 14–18 years, Rautahat, Madhesh Province, Nepal, 4 December 2022; FGD with adolescents, female, 14–16 years, Rautahat, Madhesh Province, Nepal, 4 December 2022.
[116] For example: Individual interview with parent/caregiver of married child, male, Surkhet, Karnali, Nepal, 12 December 2022.

"I did not get married because of family issues, I married because I was in love… My husband decided that we should get married. He was 20 years old and his family forced him to get married because they said 'we need a sister-in-law'. That's how he convinced me. **[Why did they need someone at home at that time?]** His brother's wife said that she was alone, and that she wanted a friend and needed some help. So, my husband married me. **[Did you want to get married at that time, or was there pressure to?]** Nobody pressured me, I did it on my own. **[Did anyone express any concerns about your age?]** My parents raised the question that I was young and it was not time for me to get married, but I married anyway."

A married adolescent, female, 18 years, Surkhet, Karnali, Nepal, 9 December 2022.

In some cases, self-initiated marriages could be seen as a strategy for children to avoid an arranged marriage; children chose their partner in the belief that they would be forced to marry someone by their parents.

"My mother-in-law wanted my wife to get married to one of her relatives in their town… My wife told me that, so I went there and brought her here. I had already informed my family about my relationship, and so [had] my wife to her mum… There are two main reasons we married at that time. Firstly, I was deeply in love with her. I [did not want] to live apart from her. Secondly, on her side, other marriage proposals were also in front of her. So, either she married me, or another person. She didn't have any other choice, so in that case I thought it was a good idea to get married."

- A married youth, male, 20 years, Surkhet, Karnali, Nepal, 14 December 2022.

In many circumstances, self-initiated marriages were not initially accepted by parents or family members. But, over time, parents allowed the children to marry someone of their own choice. Parents often reported that they are left with "no choice" but to arrange marriages between two children in love, out of fear their children will commit suicide if they are unable to marry the partner of their choosing.[117] Sometimes, children also indicated that parents are forced to accept and support with the arrangement of a self-initiated marriage.

"My parents got me married and they were scared that I would commit suicide, so they agreed that it was my choice. [They said], 'If the boy is mean or the marriage does not work out or the in-laws are horrible, then you can't come back [home] because it was your choice'. **[Why were they scared you would hurt yourself?]** Because the neighbours told my father, 'If she doesn't get married to who she wants, she will not be happy and she may do something silly'… My parents were not happy I got married at that time because I was underage. They wanted me to get married at another age, but the financial burden was hard."

- A married adolescent, female, 18 years, Sylhet City, Sylhet, Bangladesh, 24 November 2022.

There were examples where self-initiated marriages were not accepted, resulting in family breakdown. The consequence of self-initiated marriages appears to be that children (particularly girls) are often left in difficult, and sometimes abusive, situations as a result of not being able to seek support from their family, as illustrated by a research participant in Udaipur, India:

"Currently, I live with my husband's family. I [had a] love marriage with my husband, so my parents have untied all the knots with me. They don't talk to me. I am even not allowed to go to my village without my parents' permission. My husband… comes to visit me and his family whenever he gets time off from work. He is good to me, but whenever he leaves, my in-laws start misbehaving with me and they mistreat me because their son [married] me without their permission. Here in our locality, parents accept the love marriage if they are parents of a boy but not if they are the parents of a girl. So, even if my in-laws are not behaving nicely with me, I have to still stay here because I am not allowed to go to my parents."

- A married youth, female, 20 years, Udaipur, Rajasthan, India, 13 January 2023.

[117] For example: individual interview with parent/caregiver of married child, female, 45 years, Cachar, India, 23 November 2022; FGD with parents/caregivers, female, 27–45 years, Bagerhat, Khulna, Bangladesh, 30 November 2022.

Parents appear less likely to accept the self-initiated marriage of a girl, perhaps owing to gender norms and beliefs which place the behaviour and choices of girls under much tighter control than boys *(see also section 4.2.1.2)*. Differences in the likelihood of accepting self-initiated marriages are linked to other factors, such as economic security (for example, where parents permitted a marriage because boy was from a "good family" or generated income). Conversely, being unable to provide or being too young to manage the responsibilities of marriage were cited as reasons for non-acceptance of a self-initiated marriage.

4.1.3 Attitudes towards different marriage types

Despite the fact that self-initiated marriages were widely reported to have increased during COVID-19, attitudes towards such marriages among participants remained predominantly negative. When asked about the benefits and limitations of self-initiated marriages, participants commonly stated that there were no positives to such marriage because it brought shame to the family, went against parents' wishes, and because children did not understand the responsibilities of marriage. The predominant narrative was that arranged marriages are the "right" type of marriage.

> "Parents' blessings are the most important thing in life and if someone has a love marriage, their parents would be hurt. In love marriages, parents will never be happy. Parents have brought us up... Society will say a lot of negative things to those who have a love marriage, as parents' honour will be lost."
>
> - FGD with adolescents, female, 14–16 years, Cachar, Assam, India, 23 November 2022.

Across Bangladesh, India and Nepal, there was no single research location where self-initiated marriages were universally accepted, though levels of acceptance were, at times, inconsistent across participant types. For example, in Bagerhat, Bangladesh, there were differences in reported levels of acceptance of self-initiated marriage between mothers, fathers and children. Fathers reported that most people in the community are accepting of self-initiated marriage,[118] whereas girls reported that society looks down upon such marriages and parents prohibit them from socializing with girls who have entered into a self-initiated marriage.[119] Mothers also reiterated that self-initiated marriages are not accepted in the community.

> In the community, love marriage is seen negatively, because the children are seen as disobedient, or [people think] they didn't have a good upbringing... [Children] don't know right from wrong and choose the wrong partner often... Also, in love marriages, you will not get family support when there is problem. **[Why do you not get support in a love marriage?]** Because parents are hurt. Also, in-laws will always have something against the girl, they always think it's the girl's fault and she will always be treated that way."
>
> - FGD with parents/caregivers, female, 30–40 years, Bagerhat, Khulna, Bangladesh, 27 November 2022.

Some participants gave examples of the negative repercussions some children had faced following a love marriage, including violence, further highlighting the lack of acceptance of this practice.

> "There was a girl who ran away with her boyfriend... Her parents were so angry [at] her and the boy. They lodged a complaint against the boy and his parents. The police found them both. But when she returned home, her father beat her up so badly... [he] broke her legs and she got multiple fractures. Her hands are not working. She is unable to carry any objects."
>
> - FGD with adolescents, female, 15–19 years, Sawai Madhopur, Rajasthan, India, 7 December 2022.

[118] For example: FGD with parents/caregivers, male, 24–62 years, Bagerhat, Khulna, Bangladesh, 30 November 2022.
[119] For example: FGD with adolescents, 12–14 years, Bagerhat, Khulna, Bangladesh, 27 November 2022.

While parents and caregivers tended to have more concretely negative views of self-initiated marriages, some adolescent participants had more positive views. Girls often stated that they would be happier if they were able to choose their own husband. Some thought it important for children to be able to choose their partner. For example, differing attitudes towards self-initiated marriages emerged in an FGD with girls in Cachar, India.[120]

> "Many have issues after they have a love marriage, so I don't think it is a good idea."
>
> "Many can live peacefully and have a good relationship if they are earning and are smart enough to manage life issues on their own."
>
> "[Having a] love marriage is not good, as parents may not accept them."
>
> "I think young people should look for their own partners. Only parents' decisions are not enough. If they choose their own partners, they will be happy in the marriage."
>
> "We can know beforehand whether they are good people or not in a love marriage, and if they match with us."
>
> - FGD with adolescents, female, 15 years, Cachar, Assam, India, 24 November, 2022.

4.1.4 Conclusion

While arranged marriages appear to have remained the dominant form of marriage in the research locations during COVID-19, it was strongly reported that self-initiated marriages increased during this time. However, self-initiated marriage appears to refer to multiple kinds of situations, including some in which girls have little agency. Conversely, many arranged marriages during COVID-19 appeared to have been relationships based on love that turned into arranged marriages. Despite the perceived increase in self-initiated marriages during COVID-19, attitudes towards such marriages remained negative among the community.

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[120] FGD with adolescents, females, 15 years, Cachar, Assam, India, 24 November, 2022.

4.2 Impacts of COVID-19 on the drivers and mediators of child marriage

The factors that drive and mediate child marriage are deeply contextual. While the circumstances, beliefs and practices of families and individual children are key to understanding decisions and practices, it is also important to understand child marriage within the broader political, economic and social structures of societies and communities. The research findings are therefore presented according to the social-ecological model which understands drivers and moderators of child marriage at the structural, community, family and individual levels, recognizes these factors to be interrelated and interdependent, and acknowledges that their functions and links can vary according to context. The findings are presented as an analysis of how the changed context brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic has likely impacted drivers and mediators at each level, taking into consideration the context of the research locations.

4.2.1 Structural drivers

4.2.1.1 Legal and policy frameworks

There are numerous laws and policies in place relating to child and forced marriage in South Asia, at both the regional level and nationally, in India, Bangladesh and Nepal *(see Figure 10)*.[121]

Existing research indicates that there may not be a strong association between protective laws and rates of child marriage. Previous research has, for instance, shown that limited awareness of the law within communities results in limited adherence,[122] while lack of capacity or political will may also be a contributing factor. Moreover, research suggests that knowledge of child marriage laws is not, of itself, sufficient to prevent child marriage. For example, one study in Bangladesh found that 48.4 per cent of households that reported being aware of child marriage laws had a girl under the age of 18 who was married residing in the household.[123] While this is lower than the 60.7 per cent of households with a married child who reported being unaware of child marriage laws,[124] it shows that those aware of child marriage laws often continue to engage in this practice, perhaps indicating that other drivers may be more significant.

Figure 10: National laws and policies to eradicate child marriage.

Country	Bangladesh	India	Nepal
Legal age of majority	18 years [125]	18 years[126]	18 years[127]
Minimum age of criminal responsibility	9 years (12 years for children who have not attained " sufficient maturity")[128]	7 years (12 years for children who have "immature understanding")[129]	10 years old[130]
Age of consent[131]	16 years for girls[132]	18 years old for girls and boys[133]	18 years old for girls and boys[134]

[121] A list of laws and policies is available at: https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/nfm3c9nmqyl2ec34wozab/Annex-D-Legislation-and-Policy-2023.docx.
[122] UNFPA and the University of Dhaka Department of Population Sciences, *Context of Child Marriage and its Complications, in Bangladesh,* p. 8.
[123] "Child Marriage in Bangladesh: An exploration of preferences, beliefs and norms – Policy brief on ending child marriage", unpublished internal document, 2018.
[124] Ibid.
[125] The Majority Act (Act No. IX of 1875) (Bangladesh), Section 3.
[126] The Majority Act (Act No. 9 of 1875) (India), Section 3.
[127] While the law does not appear to contain a provision on a general legal age of majority, persons attain the right to vote at 18 years: The Constitution of Nepal (as amended, 2017), Article 84(5).
[128] Penal Code (Bangladesh) Sections 82 and 83.
[129] Penal Code (India) Sections 82 and 83.
[130] Children Act (Nepal) Section 36. This provision places limitations on the sentences to be imposed on children aged 10–14 years, 14–16 years and 16–18 years.
[131] The age at which a person is considered to be able to give fully-informed consent to sexual acts. This age is typically set within a State's criminal laws, through provisions prohibiting statutory rape.
[132] Prevention of Cruelty Against Women and Children Act 2003, Section 9 (there does not appear to be an explicit legal age of sexual consent for males).
[133] Criminal Law (Amendment) Act 2013 (girls) and Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act 2012 (boys and girls).
[134] The National Penal (Code) Act 2017, Sections 219 and 226.

Country	Bangladesh	India	Nepal
Minimum legal age for marriage	**18 years for girls, 21 years for boys** *Child Marriage Restraint Act 2017* • Article 2(1) set marriageable age at 18 years for girls and 21 for boys. • Article 19 includes a caveat that means courts could allow child marriage in "special circumstances".	**18 for girls and 21 for boys** *Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2006* • Minimum legal age of marriage in India is 18 years for girls and 21 for boys.	**20 years for girls and boys** *Marriage Registration Act 1971* • Article 4 set the marriageable age at 20 years for girls and boys. *National Civil (Code) Act, 2017* • Removed the ability under the 1971 Act to marry at 18 years old with parental consent.
Dowry	**Banned** *The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1980* Criminalizes the giving and taking of dowry. The Act defines "dowry" as "any property or valuable security" given or agreed to be given as consideration for the marriage, by one party to another party to a marriage or their parents (or any other person).	**Banned** *The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961* Article 3: Article 3: Penalty for giving or taking dowry. (1) If any person, after the commencement of this Act, gives or takes or abets the giving or taking of dowry, he shall be punishable with imprisonment for a term which shall not be less than five years, and with the fine which shall not be less than fifteen thousand rupees or the amount of the value of such dowry, whichever is more.	**Banned** *The National Penal (Code) Act, 2017* Article 174: Prohibition of transacting property in marriage: (1)No marriage shall be concluded, or caused to be concluded, upon having asked for, or on the condition of receiving or giving of, any type of movable or immovable property, dowry or any property from the bridegroom or the bride side, except such ordinary gift, donation, money or one set of jewellery worn on the body as has been practiced in his or her custom. (2) A person who commits the offence referred to in subsection (1) shall be liable to a sentence of imprisonment for a term not exceeding three years or a fine not exceeding thirty thousand rupees or both the sentences.
Civil Registration (Birth & marriage)	Must provide birth certificate before a marriage can be registered.	No mention of needing proof of age to register marriage.	Marriage can only occur if both parties to a marriage are 20 years old, but there is no mention of proof of age.
Divorce & annulments for child marriage	Available for Muslims (with caveats), not available for Hindus.	Available.	Available.
National action plan or strategy addressing child marriage	**Under implementation** *National Plan of Action to End Child Marriage 2018–2030* Aims to end child marriage for girls under 15 by 2021 and for girls under 18 by 2041.	**No indication of implementation** The government is yet to adopt the *National Strategy on the Prevention of Child Marriage and the National Action Plan to Prevent Child Marriage.* Both are currently in draft form.[135]	**Under implementation** *National Strategy on Ending Child Marriage from 2016* • Led to the introduction of the National Civil Code, 2017, and National Penal Code, 2017, which set the minimum age for marriage at 20 years for both men and women.

Protective legal frameworks remained in place in all three countries during COVID-19 *(see Figure 10)*. However, interview participants indicated that COVID-containment measures, including lockdowns and restrictions on movement, reduced the extent to which the law could be implemented. Across all research locations, difficulties travelling to police stations and government offices during lockdowns appears to have limited access to the justice system in order to seek the prevention of child marriage or redress for children or parents/caregivers (however, legal recourse to prevent child marriage appears to have been under-utilized even before COVID-19). Several participants also stated that the economic insecurity created by the COVID-19 context may have made registrars and authorities more susceptible to bribes, which was noted among participants as a factor that hindered the effective implementation of child marriage laws. This, along with the limited police presence due to COVID-19 restrictions

[135] UNICEF and UNFPA, *Child Marriage in South Asia: An evidence review.*

and the need to prioritize the policing of containment measures, may have made it easier for authorities to perform marriages without fear of punishment.

Nevertheless, it is unlikely that the reduced ability of police or government officials to enforce the law and for children and families to access justice during COVID-19 had any meaningful impact on child marriage practices. In Bangladesh and India, research participants demonstrated limited knowledge of the laws relating to child marriage. Although some recognized the minimum legal age of marriage, most parents (particularly those of married children in individual interviews) and children alike were unable to identify the legal age of marriage in their localities, and denied knowledge of the laws and, in some instances, claimed that no such laws existed. However, service providers in both countries were more capable of accurately stating the legal age of marriage.

Participants in Nepal demonstrated better awareness of child marriage laws. Service providers, unmarried adolescents and parents/caregivers within the wider community were able to accurately identify the minimum legal age of marriage, whereas married children and parents of married children demonstrated a weaker understanding. However, this latter finding can be attributed to social desirability bias, and not wanting to face repercussions for knowingly carrying out an illegal act (i.e., marrying a child).

It appears that in the research locations child marriages are often not formally registered, a practice that was particularly pronounced in rural locations.[136] For example, a *pandit* in Rautahat (Madhesh, Nepal) noted that the majority of marriages in rural communities were not registered,[137] and in Sawai Madhopur (Rajasthan, India), it was found that marriages in rural areas were less likely to be registered than in urban areas.[138] The weak adherence to formal civil registration systems may mean that children in rural areas can be married more easily and without consequence. Across different research locations, it appears to be relatively easy to produce a fake birth certificate which inflates a child's age, or simply to convince a registrar of the need for child marriage to take place, indicating that the enforcement mechanisms were already limited prior to COVID-19.

In addition, the data demonstrated the dominance of social and cultural norms and beliefs that drive child marriage and, relatedly, the limited acceptance of legal frameworks in research locations. Across research locations, participants reported that community members knew that child marriage was illegal, but that religious and social norms took precedence over legal standards.

> "People know about the law on child marriage, but they don't care about it and don't follow it."
>
> - Assistant sub-inspector, Women, Children and Senior Citizen Centre, Rautahat, Madhesh, Nepal, 6 November 2022.
>
> "Communities are increasingly more and more aware of this definition of child marriage but that does not stop them from participating in it."
>
> - Chief Planning Officer, Hailakandi, Assam, India, 6 November 2022.
>
> "Our traditions and customs are different. The law and government do not understand that."
>
> - A parent/caregiver of married child, male, 50 years, Bihar, India, 21 November 2022.

This further indicates that limitations on the ability to monitor and enforce laws during COVID-19 likely had a limited impact on child marriage practices in the research locations.

4.2.1.2 Social and gender norms

The research findings strongly demonstrated that social norms (the "agreed-upon expectations or rules that govern behaviour" through expectations, beliefs and social incentives)[139] persist as a key driver of child marriage in the research locations. As indicated in the literature review, patriarchal ideologies are deeply rooted in South Asian cultures and continue to pervade the structural, community, familial and individual levels of society. While later sections of this report discuss how social norms influence experiences at these different levels, the following discussion seeks to unpack these norms and how they have encouraged, or continue to encourage, child marriage during COVID-19 at the structural level. Throughout the report, it is also clear that these social and gender norms underpin many of the other drivers identified.

[136] This finding is consistent with a recent quantitative study carried out in Nepal on rates of adherence to Civil Registration and Vital Statistics, which found relatively low rates of marriage registration across the research provinces, particularly in rural areas. See: Poudel, S., "Deep dive study on addressing bottlenecks of birth registration", Himal Innovative Development and Research, 2022.
[137] KII with Pandit, Yamunamai, Rautahat, Madhesh Province, Nepal, 6 December 2022.
[138] KII with Principal of High School, Sawai Madhopur, Rajasthan, 8 December 2022.
[139] UNICEF and UNFPA, *Child Marriage in South Asia: An evidence review,* p. 20.

I. Gender roles and values

It is clear from the data that marriage is considered a "key life achievement"[140] across the research locations.

> "Marriage is part of our society. That is how the world works. You need to get married and have children so that your lineage continues."
>
> - A parent/caregiver, male, 25-40 years, Cachar, Assam, India, 21 November 2022.

There was a prevalent belief that a girl's "ultimate destiny"[141] is marriage, and her main duty in life is to "have children and make a family."[142] Parents also feel a sense of duty to marry their children, expressing feelings of peace and relief once this duty has been fulfilled.[143] Marriage is not considered the endeavour of two people alone, but as what "joins families, not individuals, and confers inter- and intrafamily roles and responsibilities."[144] Families, therefore, play a prominent role both in arranging a marriage (whether fully arranged or a family-approved self-initiated marriage), as well as during a marriage. Married girls are treated with more respect in society than their unmarried peers, while married and unmarried boys are both treated respectfully.[145] This illustrates the gender hierarchies that exist within the research locations, and explains why girls see marriage as a way to obtain social empowerment and status.

Social norms in South Asia prescribe patriarchal gender-based roles that accord limited value to girls and women. The data demonstrated that across all research locations, it is believed that girls should be submissive and subservient, especially in relation to husbands, parents and in-laws,[146] and that girls should be delicate and more obedient than boys.[147] The belief that a girl should be obedient and delicate appears to have driven a preference for younger brides.

As a participant in Hailakandi (Assam, India) explained, if a girl "is young, she will also be beautiful and docile so it is easier for the in-laws to manage her."[148]

An entrenched belief across research locations is the notion that girls are burdens on their families. This is tightly associated with structural gender inequalities that place women and girls in positions where they are financially reliant on men and accorded less value. Participants in Bangladesh noted how girls are not usually permitted to work in employment, so they are unable to contribute towards the family income,[149] unlike boys who can earn a living and take care of the family financially.[150] Parents choose to marry their daughters[145] early to "get relief from both the economic burden and social responsibility" of raising a daughter,[151] and because they believe that "a girl child is not an asset to a family. She is a liability. Either she studies or she gets married."[152]

> "The situation at my home was very bad. My father was too sick to take care of us and they wanted to get me married so I could go to my husband's house and have someone to provide for me."
>
> - A married adolescent, female, 18 years, Cachar, Assam, India, 21 November 2022.

Parents tend not to have the incentive to invest in their daughter's education, as she is considered destined to leave the house and fulfil her household duties elsewhere.[153] COVID-19 made this notion of girls being burdens on their families more pronounced and the ensuing economic crisis increased the likelihood of a girl being married to relieve her families' financial burdens. The pandemic also meant many families experienced heightened tension at home, so many girls had increased feelings of being neglected or of being a burden to their families. Marriage was thus regarded as a practical solution for a girl, as a husband's role is to provide for her needs.

[140] KII with UNICEF and UNFPA Nepal, Lalitpur, Kathmandu, Nepal, 17 December 2022.
[141] KII with Assistant Head Teacher, Chapainawabganj, Rajshahi, Bangladesh, 20 November 2022.
[142] Individual interview with married adolescent, female, 17 years, Hindu, Bengali, Cachar, Assam, India, 23 November 2022.
[143] Individual interview with parent/caregiver of married child, female, 43, Muslim, Hailakandi, Assam, India, 18 November 2022.
[144] UNICEF and UNFPA, *Child Marriage in Humanitarian Settings in South Asia*.
[145] FGD with adolescents, female, 14–18 years, Muslim, Hailakandi, Assam, India, 14 November 2022.
[146] FGD with parents/caregivers, female, 25–45 years, Muslim, Gaibandha, Rangpur, Bangladesh, 24 November 2022.
[147] FGD with parents/caregivers, male, 44–58 years, Muslim, Hailakandi, Assam, India, 16 November 2022.
[148] FGD with adolescents, males, 14–18 years, Muslim, Hailakandi, Assam, India, 14 November 2022.
[149] KII with Technical Coordinator, CARE Bangladesh (NGO), Dhaka (via zoom), 9 December 2022.
[150] FGD with adolescents, female, 12–14 years, Muslim, Bagerhat, Khulna, Bangladesh, 27 November 2022.
[151] Individual interview with parent/caregiver of married child, male, 50 years, Chapainawabganj, Rajshahi, Bangladesh, 22 November 2022.
[152] KII with Project Coordinator, Government Health Scheme, Cachar, Assam, India, 21 November 2022.
[153] FGD with adolescents, female, 14–20 years, Sheikhpura, Bihar, India, 27 November 2022.

This belief that a husband's role is to protect and support his family has meant that parents may have been more likely to arrange a marriage with a considerable age difference between the husband and wife. The older the boy is, the more likely he is to have a stable income and have accumulated wealth to support his family. In response to a scenario featuring a young girl being forcibly married to a significantly older man, while acknowledging the negatives of the age difference, both children and parents spoke positively about the money that would result from such a marriage. One girl from Sylhet noted how, "[the girl] might be happy because of the money, she might want to marry someone who can look after her."[154] As COVID-19 has caused greater financial difficulties for families, the finding suggests that this may have served to further normalize child marriages in which there are substantial age disparities.

In the research locations, the traditionally prescribed role for girls/women is that of the caretaker of the family who is responsible for household chores and for raising children. This idea that girls/women are homemakers has informed a particular trend: many families seek out daughters-in-law to provide extra support with household duties: the "expected role of a girl after marriage is to support her in-laws' family in their household work."[154] While this is an historical trend, COVID-19 restrictions meant that more people were at home than usual, increasing the care burden and the amount of household work that needed to be done.[156] It appears that many people subsequently sought out daughters-in-law or wives to help support their families.

More members of a household were also required to work as a result of the COVID-19 financial crises, thus necessitating an extra pair of hands to help with the household duties.

> "My mother-in-law needed a supportive hand, my husband's brother is disabled, so they needed a girl to support the household. Lots of people were at home during COVID, it was a lot for her. That's why they insisted we get married."
>
> - A married adolescent, female, 19 years, Surkhet, Karnali, Nepal, 9 December 2022.

However, the data indicate a (limited) growing social acceptance of women and girls working to support their families during COVID-19. Part of this shift has been attributed to the rising education levels of women, which means families are more supportive of them working.[157] The other part is that COVID-19 caused significant financial challenges, so some women were permitted to work out of necessity to support their family's income. In these circumstances, women tended to adopt menial jobs, such as manual labour (i.e., brickmaking, crop harvesting, etc.), embroidery/tailoring or cleaning. This growing acceptance of women working outside the home was not consistent across all research locations, as illustrated by participants in Bangladesh: "A lot of women are not allowed to leave their house after marriage and they have to take care of the house"[158] and in India: "if she works outside, she is perceived as a bad woman and as someone who does not want to do domestic work. Society here is very judgmental toward working women."[159] Adolescent girls and boys demonstrated a greater acceptance of girls working compared with parents/caregivers, but clarified their understanding that they live in cultures and communities that are not supportive.

II. Societal perceptions of childhood and readiness for marriage

Entrenched social norms relating to gender are also associated with beliefs on the end of childhood and the point at which girls and boys are deemed ready for marriage. The norms relating to the expected roles and responsibilities within marriage (that women are responsible for maintaining the household and childrearing, and men are responsible for economically providing for the family) inform community views about the ideal age for marriage. In the research locations, readiness for marriage is not understood as a linear concept, but rather with multilayered and interrelated determinants.

On the one hand, religious norms play an influential role on views concerning readiness for marriage. For example, according to Islam, people should only marry if they are physically mature and of age.[160] Though religious texts do not specify what age this is precisely, in India and Bangladesh, it has been interpreted as the age at which a girl reaches puberty.[161] Religious laws focus on puberty so that "the girl does not waste any of her reproductive years,"[162] which illustrates how religion reinforces the notion of motherhood and marriage as a girl's fate. However, NHFS

[154] FGD with adolescent, female, 13–16 years, Muslim, Sylhet City, Sylhet, Bangladesh, 21 November 2022.
[155] KII with Programme Coordinator, SPREAD (NGO), Nabarangpur, Odisha, India, 7 February 2023.
[156] FGD with adolescent, female, 14–17 years, Surkhet, Karnali, Nepal, 10 December 2022; FGD with parents/caregivers, male, 44–58 years, Muslim, Hailakandi, Assam, India, 16 November 2022.
[157] FGD with adolescent, female, 14–18 years, Muslim, Hailakandi, Assam, India, 14 November 2022.
[158] FGD with adolescent, female, 15–17 years, Muslim, Dhaka, Bangladesh, 17 November 2022.
[159] KII with Mission Coordinator, District Hub Empowerment for Women, Cachar, Assam, 22 November 2022.
[160] KII with Religious Teacher and Imam, High School, Bagerhat, Khulna, Bangladesh, 27 November 2022.
[161] KII with Assistant Head Teacher, High School, Bagerhat, Khulna, Bangladesh, 27 November 2022.
[162] FGD with parents/caregivers, female, 24–40 years, Hailakandi, Assam, India, 14 November 2022.

data from India show that the median age at which women aged 25–49 years were married does not differ between religious groups.[163] This indicates that religious beliefs, though used to justify marriage at an early age, are not always a driver of child marriage.

Culturally, beliefs on readiness for marriage in the research locations appear to be associated with a child's ability to fulfil their gendered roles within marriage. For example, if a girl's "purpose" is to mother children, then puberty is marked as the age at which she should marry. While this does not relate to a specific age, in practice, this has meant that girls aged 10–16 years who have reached menarche are deemed "ready" for marriage. Using menstruation as a marker is underpinned by and reinforces the belief that the social role of girls/women is to have children, tying a woman's identity and social status to motherhood. Using puberty as the marker at which a girl is ready for marriage, paired with the belief that a girl should be obedient and docile, has meant that, culturally, young girls are seen as the ideal brides, as illustrated by adolescent boys in a focus group discussion in Hailakandi (Assam, India): "Most families want a young daughter-in-law so she can have many children and be fit to do household work."[164] This idealizing of younger brides has created a societal fear that it is more difficult to marry off older girls, with parents worrying that "If the girl passes the age of 17–18, she isn't considered an honour anymore, and there are no more requests to marry her."[165] This fear, along with the fear that all the suitable grooms will be gone if she is older, appears to have led parents to push even more to marry their daughters at a young age.

A boy's readiness for marriage, on the other hand, is defined by his ability to generate an income for his family, thus centring on the male role to protect and provide. The increase in boys dropping out of school to work and financially support their families as a result of the impacts of COVID-19 may have, in some contexts, been seen as a sign that boys are ready for marriage at a younger age. Indeed, in all locations, it seemed to be that school dropout and employment of boys preceded their child marriage. Key informants also identified this as a driver.

III. Fear and regulation of girls' sexuality

In South Asia child marriage is used as a method to control girls' sexuality, which is linked to patriarchal norms relating to gender and gender roles. In particular, the literature demonstrates that the "fear, stigma and desire" to control adolescent girls' sexuality is a core driver of child marriage,[166] and the research findings corroborate this notion.

A prevalent social belief across the research locations is that a girl's honour and "goodness" is intertwined with her chastity. It appears that parents, in fear of adolescent sexual curiosity and desire, see early marriage as way to reduce such "deviations".[167] For a girl, engaging in sexual relations outside marriage can bring shame and dishonour to herself and her family.

> "Communities define child marriage in very different ways … Sometimes, if the children have attained puberty, they will be considered eligible for marriage. Sometimes, if the boy has started earning at an early age, like 16-17, that will also be considered 'marriageable age'. That is how communities define child marriage."
>
> - District Coordinator, Indo-Global Social Service Society, Assam, India, 25 November 2022.

Parents and girls alike fear harsh judgement from the community should she be found behaving in a way that indicates participation in sexual activity. Adolescent girls also emphasized the persecution they would face if found interacting with a boy.[168] Not only do girls face potential violence if they contravene social norms on sexual chastity, but men are not held to the same standard: the "blame" for engaging in sexual activity outside of marriage is often placed on the girl.

> "Once I was informed that a [15–16-year-old] girl was being stoned in an area… I found that the girl had a relationship with a rich man and got pregnant before marriage, so the villagers stoned her. I told the police and some Union Parishad members. They talked to the family and got her a sewing machine so she could learn tailoring to support herself. **[What happened to the man?]** Nobody discussed the man. Even in the upper classes it's the same, the girl is always blamed."
>
> - Teacher, Rangpur Dinajpur Rural Service, Sylhet City, Sylhet, Bangladesh, 24 November 2022.

[163] Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), 2019-2021: India Report.
[164] FGD with adolescents, male, 14-18 years, Muslim, Hailakandi, Assam, India, 14 November 2022.
[165] FGD with parents/caregivers, male, 40–55 years, Chapainawabganj, Rajshahi, Bangladesh, 22 November 2022.
[166] Child Marriage Research to Action Network (CRANK), *Evidence Review: Child marriage interventions and research from 2020 to 2022*, Girls Not Brides: The Global Partnership to End Child Marriage and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Global Programme to End Child Marriage, January 2023.
[167] FGD with adolescents, male, 13–25 years, Sylhet City, Sylhet, Bangladesh, 20 November 2022.
[168] KII with UNICEF and UNFPA Nepal, Lalitpur, Kathmandu, Nepal, 17 December 2022.

To limit negative responses from their communities, and to mitigate any damage done to the child and families' reputations, parents often resort to early marriages for their daughters.

> "People see girls talking with other men or boys, then community people will comment on them. Due to the pressure of [the] community and fear of elopement of their girls, people get their daughters married at an early age."
>
> - Teacher, High School, Dhanusha, Madhesh, Nepal, 13 December 2022.

Concern over, and scrutiny of, girls' sexuality became particularly pronounced during the pandemic, as the closure of schools meant girls were at home with little to do. This fed into parental fears that their daughter would engage in sexual relations.

> "If girls aren't going to school, then girls aren't occupied and parents are scared the girls will be distracted and find love and bring shame on the family ... so out of fear they are getting girls married."
>
> - Adolescent and Youth Programme Analyst, UNFPA Bangladesh, 10 December 2022.

Parents in the research locations appeared to have turned to early and forced marriages out of a heightened fear of self-initiated relationships and marriages. Arranged marriages have often been used as a preventative action in the research locations, but the intensified fear of self-initiated relationships arising due to COVID-19 appears to have made parents more likely to turn to early/forced marriages. This parental fear also meant they became more restrictive of their children's freedom.

> "After COVID, parents were scared of getting their children involved in 'love matters' [romantic relationships]. So, they were not allowed to roam freely..."
>
> - FGD with adolescents, female, 13–17 years, Purnea, Bihar, India, 23 November 2022.

With fathers and other male family members spending more time at home during COVID-19 across research locations, due to job loss and movement restrictions, the behaviour of girls was subjected to greater scrutiny. This perhaps exacerbated the regulation of girls' sexuality and further increased the prevalence of child marriage. The fear surrounding girls' sexuality also appeared to extend to fears of sexual violence: the data indicated that concerns for girls' security also drove child marriage.

> "Parents think their daughter might be raped or sexually harassed. It is not just about the burden; it is also about girls' safety. If girls are married, then men leave them alone."
>
> - Representative, Manushor Jonno Foundation, Bagerhat, Khulna, Bangladesh, 19 December 2022.

The idea that a husband is a protective factor against sexual harassment was prevalent across all research locations. This sense of insecurity was intensified by COVID-19 as more people were at home and had restricted movement in their towns/villages. Parents in Chapainawabganj (Rajshahi, Bangladesh) noted that there was an increased number of youths in the village during COVID-19, which meant more girls were getting harassed.[169] Furthermore, as a result of COVID-19, many men died or moved abroad to find employment, and there was a perception that the absence of a male authority figure at home left girls more vulnerable to harassment. In such situations, parents saw early marriage as a solution to their fears over their daughter's security.

IV. Dowry

Social norms also drive and are reinforced by dowry practices – a form of payment of money/goods from a bride's family to the groom's. According to the CRC and CEDAW Committees, the arrangement of marriage through payment or preferment "violates the right to freely choose a spouse" and can increase the vulnerability of girls and women to violence and harmful practices, including child marriage.[170] While the exchange of dowry is prohibited by law in all three countries, the practice is still embedded in social and cultural traditions in South Asia. Culturally, it is considered a parental obligation to provide dowries for daughters, with parents experiencing a great sense of shame or fear that their daughter may face violence or be returned to the parental home as a result of their failure to provide one.

[169] For example: FGD with parents/caregivers, male, 40-50 years, Chapainawabganj, Rajshahi, Bangladesh, 21 November 2022.
[170] GC 31 para. 24.

Dowry payments are also a source of capital accumulation, which is important in contexts in which the population lives in poverty or is financially struggling.[171] Dowries reinforce "the deeply engrained worldview that girls are of lesser value than boys"[172] and entrench and drive rigid gender norms relating to the roles and characteristics of the ideal woman or man.

Dowry drives child marriage. Younger brides require lower dowries as they are considered by families of boys to be more malleable and more willing to contribute to family chores without complaint, and are therefore preferable brides,[173] while the lower cost motivates families of girls to marry their daughters younger.

The findings show that the dowry is still a prevailing driver of early marriages in the research locations. The practice is widely used across all locations in Bangladesh, most locations in India (all but Nabarangpur, Odisha) and some locations in Nepal (Madhesh).

Dowry practices in research locations

Typically, dowries come in the form of either cash or gift items such as furniture, cars, motorcycles, etc.[174] Cash was the most common form of dowry exchanged in Bangladesh, with children and parents reporting amounts of BDT 110,000–200,000 (US$ 1,034–US$1,880). This is significantly more than the amounts reported in previous literature on Bangladesh: one 2021 study reported it to be US$ 786,[175] and another in 2018 reported US$ 625.[176] While this suggests that dowry amounts have increased, whether this is associated with COVID-19 is unclear. In research locations in India, the prevalent practice appears to be providing a mixture of money and gifts (e.g., a motorbike or jewellery) as dowry. In the areas of Nepal where dowries were prevalent (Dhanusha and Rautahat, both in Madhesh), wealthier families reportedly gave NPR 300,000 (roughly USD $2,289) in addition to gifts, while less wealthy families gave NPR 100,000–200,000 with gifts.[177] A key finding was that participants in some research locations, particularly in Bangladesh and India, claimed that the communities no longer participated in dowry practices, but only gave "gifts". However, it is evident that this was not a mutual exchange of gifts, but rather the bride's family "gifting" utensils and money to the groom's family. Despite the more subtle ways in which requests are made, girls' families still feel compelled to provide dowry-like goods.


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[171] Alston M, Whittenbury K., Haynes A., Godden N., "Are climate challenges reinforcing child and forced marriage and dowry as adaptation strategies in the context of Bangladesh?", Women's Studies International Forum 47, 137–144, 2014.
[172] CARE, *Cultural Context of Child Marriage in Nepal and Bangladesh: Findings from CARE's Tipping Point Project Community Participatory Analysis,* 2016.
[173] UNICEF and UNFPA, *Child Marriage in South Asia: An evidence review.*
[174] KII with Technical Coordinator, CARE Bangladesh (NGO), Dhaka (via Zoom), 9 December 2022.
[175] National Bureau of Economic Research, *A Signal to End Child Marriage: Theory and experimental evidence from Bangladesh,* July 2021.
[176] Amin Sajeda, et al, Accelerating Action to End Child Marriage in Bangladesh. Population Council, New York and Dhaka, 2018.
[177] For example: Individual interview with married adolescent, female, 18 years, Hindu, Dhanusha, Madhesh Province, Nepal, 12 November 2022.

According to research participants, for girls, the dowry demand nominally centres around her appearance and age. If a girl is deemed beautiful and fair, families are willing to accept a smaller dowry, while girls with darker complexions are seen as undesirable, so the groom's family may demand a higher amount. As a result, darker skinned girls tend to be married to relatives, as this involves a smaller dowry. Boys can demand a larger dowry if they are highly educated or have a good income, as these qualities are seen to support the ability to take care of a wife/family. This encourages poorer families to marry their daughters to younger boys, as that would elicit a smaller dowry. Many boys who were employed abroad or in urban areas returned home during the COVID-19 pandemic as desirable grooms. While many of these boys' parents demanded a more significant dowry, there were some instances where boys had a comparatively good income and so did not feel the need to demand a dowry, thus making them even more desirable grooms.

The research also found that, often, no dowries were exchanged in self-initiated marriages, particularly in elopements or in cases where parents disapproved of the marriage. In self-initiated marriages where both parents approved, a limited dowry was exchanged.[178] When asked about the advantages of the differing types of marriage, the lack of dowry in self-initiated marriages was frequently mentioned by research participants. Girls viewed the lack of dowry as an advantage in self-initiated marriages, whereas boys saw dowries as a motivation for having an arranged marriage.

COVID-19 impacts on the dowry system

COVID-19 has had contrasting effects on dowry practices, which are likely associated with changes in child marriage. Although the primary attitude was that COVID-19 resulted in a reduction of dowry practices which led to an increase in child marriage, there were some instances where dowries are reported to have increased, preventing child marriage.

The financial insecurity brought about during COVID-19 in the research locations appears to have made younger girls more vulnerable to child marriage. As younger girls are viewed as ideal wives for reasons set out above, their families can pay smaller dowries.[179] This meant that when families struggled financially during COVID-19, parents were more likely to marry younger daughters, due to the fear of being unable to afford their dowry when they grew older.

> "My daughter was 15 years old when she got married... Her husband was 26 or 27 years old. They were married right after lockdown, as it would have been too difficult to give her a dowry and marry her later. I thought, before all my savings end, I should get my daughter married..."
>
> - A parent/caregiver of married child, male, 50 years, Purnea, Bihar, India, 21 November 2022.

> "Many girls were married at 12–14 years old, because COVID threatened the parents even more [in terms of] how will they give dowry to the girl... That's why they thought to free themselves from the responsibility as soon as possible."
>
> - FGD with adolescents, female, 13–17 years, Purnea, Bihar, India, 23 November 2022.

Another common trend found in India and Bangladesh was that boys and their families actively sought out wives in order to get dowry money as a source of income.

> "Since COVID, there has been an increase in the practice of giving and receiving dowry. As more and more people have been pushed under the poverty line from unemployment due to COVID lockdowns, they expect the bride's family to pay a dowry in order to make some money."
>
> - Headteacher, Hailakandi, Assam, India, 16 November 2022.

While the dowry was nominally used to run the in-laws' households, there were some instances where the money was used to support the boy's education or economic opportunities, such as to fund the establishment of a business or his migration abroad for work. [180]

[178] For example: Individual interview with married adolescent, female, 20 years, Gaibandha, Rangpur, Bangladesh, 24 November 2022; Individual interview with married adolescent, male, 20 years, Hindu, Dhanusha, Madhesh Province, Nepal, 13 December 2022.
[179] KII with Chairperson, Life Nepal, Dhanusha, Madhesh Province, Nepal, 12 December 2022.
[180] For example: FGD with adolescents/youth, male, 13-15 years, Gaibandha, Rangpur, Bangladesh, 24 November 2022; FGD with adolescents, male, 18–21 years, Chapainawabganj, Rajshahi, Bangladesh, 21 November 2022.

In some research locations in India (particularly Purnea, Bihar, and Hailakandi, Assam), the value of dowry demanded increased as a result of COVID-19. Fathers from Purnea said that "Before COVID, dowry was 50,000 (US $605) to at most 80,000 (US$ 966) rupees. But now the rates have increased. Boys' family are asking four to five lakhs (US$ 4,800–6,050) now."[181] This increase can be attributed to the financial struggles families suffered as a result of COVID-19, which meant that they began to utilize dowries as a source of income. This change in dowries had inconsistent consequences; some families paid the higher price because of fears over their daughter's security and future,[182] while others reported that it deterred marriages as people could not afford such amounts during this period.[183] Some parents reported taking out loans to pay for higher dowries, which deepened the financial crises for their families.[184] In these locations, parents were more likely to give a dowry in cash rather than as gifts during COVID-19, as cash was seen as more valuable at the time.

However, in most locations in Bangladesh and Nepal, and in parts of India, participants reported that the dowry amount actually fell as a result of the pandemic as struggling families were more willing to compromise on the dowry amount. For example, one girl from Rautahat (Madhesh, Nepal) said that her dowry was NPR 10,000 (US$ 76.19), but would have been NPR 300,000–400,000 (roughly US$ 2,285–3,050) prior to lockdown.[185] The research also found that when both families were poor, there was typically no dowry exchanged.

> "We didn't receive [a dowry], nor did we pay any kind of dowry to my in-laws. Because they are also poor like us, and they know our condition and it also got worse during COVID."
>
> - A married adolescent, female, 21 years, Udaipur, Rajasthan, India, 13 January 2023.

[181] FGD with adolescents/youth, female, 13-19 years, Purnea, Bihar, India, 22 November 2022.
[182] For example FGD with adolescents/youth, female, 14–17 years, Hailakandi, Assam India, 16 November 2022.
[183] For example: FGD with adolescents/youth, female, 12–21 years, Sheikhpura, Bihar, India, 16 November 2022.
[184] For example: Individual interview with parent/caregiver of married child, female, 40 years, Hindu, Purnea, Bihar, India, 22 November 2022; Individual interview with married adolescents/youth, female, 17 years, Hindu, Sheikhpura, Bihar, India, 15 November 2022.
[185] Individual interview with married youth, female, 17 years, Muslim, Rautahat, Madhesh Province, Nepal, 5 December 2022.

Parents saw the lowering of dowry prices as a prime opportunity to marry their daughters at a reduced cost, which may have increased instances of child marriage during this time. One married girl discussed how her husband's family, who were better off than her own, lowered her dowry to BDT 50,000 (US$ 475) and "for this opportunity, my parents hurried my marriage."[186] A mother in Rautahat (Madhesh, Nepal) reported that her daughter's marriage would not have happened if it were not for the pandemic, as "there was no demand for dowry, so it happened at that time."[187] There were also some indications that parents would force their child into marriage during COVID-19, as the opportunity to pay a lower dowry was too good to miss. However, some participants reported that, at the time of the research, dowry amounts and demands had returned to pre-COVID rates.[188]

Some families reported that, instead of a reduced dowry, they negotiated a delayed payment. As many were unable to work during the lockdown, parents promised that when their financial situations improved, they would send a dowry with their daughter. For example, a mother in Sheikhpura (Bihar, India) stated that only when she and her husband could return to the city for work would they be able to "fulfil the promise of dowry to their daughter's in-laws."[189] It was more difficult to buy products due to limited trade, which also caused delays in the giving of gifts.

While a dowry is given from the girl's to the boy's side, in India, particularly in Purnea (Bihar), Cachar and Hailankandi (both Assam), the practice of bride price paid by the groom was also found. Instances were reported of older men paying significant sums to the families of younger girls in order to marry them. For example, one participant from Purnea recounted how a 12-year-old girl was married to a 40-year-old man as "the girl's father was not there. So, her mother was the only earning member and she decided to get her daughter married because the man was offering INR 50,000 to the girl's family… It is very common in poor communities… They have no choice…"[190] Muslim participants from Cachar and Hailakandi frequently referred to the practice of ***maher***, a form of money paid by the groom to the bride's side during the wedding. Interestingly, despite being a Muslim practice, ***maher*** never came up in discussion with Muslim communities in Bangladesh or Nepal.

4.2.1.3 Structural inequality (caste)

The caste system is a form of social organization that is "etched into the social fabric by codes of conduct governing modes of address, attire, physical positioning and forms of social interaction."[191] Caste is hereditary and is often defined by a specific occupation and status within an established social hierarchy. The caste system is now a deeply entrenched cultural system that is present across Hindu communities in Bangladesh, India and Nepal. Caste still has high cultural value to many parents in the research locations and has influenced child marriage practices in the region.

There are strong links between wealth, caste and child marriage. A 2016 study found that in India, child marriage was more prevalent among people from marginalized castes[192] than those from dominant castes.[193]

> "The Dalit community is in general an economically, socially and politically deprived community. We can see that there is a lot of economic problems. I myself have experienced that, in some houses, children are not getting the proper food needed or their basic needs fulfilled. They then think that when they get married, they can get better opportunities. That's why they got married. The issue is more focused on girls."
>
> - Feminist Dalit organization, Surkhet, Karnali, Nepal, 13 December, 2022.

In India and Nepal, child marriage is particularly prevalent among Dalit families. The marginalization of this community appears to have worsened as a result of COVID-19, which may have placed it at a greater risk of child marriage. The income of members of the Dalit community mostly derives from daily labour, and their inability to access work opportunities during the COVID-19 pandemic meant they fell into deeper levels of poverty. Beliefs regarding untouchability also worsened discriminatory practices during COVID-19, with participants reporting exclusionary treatment in schools and health services, and restricted access to other support services.

Across the research locations, caste was recognized as an important element for parents in both arranged and self-initiated marriages. While parents tend to report being supportive of marriage between children of the same caste, difficulties arise in the case of inter- caste marriage.As the caste system has erected a strict social stratification system

[186] Individual interview with married adolescent, female, 16 years, Muslim, Gaibandha, Rangpur, Bangladesh, 24 November 2022.
[187] Individual interview with married adolescent, female, 18 years, Hindu, Rautahat, Madhesh Province, Nepal, 2 December 2022.
[188] For example: Individual interview with married adolescent, female, 17 years, Muslim, Rautahat, Madhesh Province, Nepal, 5 December 2022.
[189] Individual interview with parent/caregiver of married child, female, 60 years, Hindu, Sheikhpura, Bihar, India, 14 November 2022.
[190] FGD with adolescents, female, 12–18 years, Purnea, Bihar, India, 20 November 2022.
[191] Gorringe H., S Jodhka, O.k. Takhar, 'Caste: Experiences in South Asia and beyond,' *contemporary south asia*, 2017, vol. 25, no.3, 230-237.
[192] In India, Scheduled Tribes, Scheduled Castes and Backward classes are constitutionally recognized as historically disadvantaged/marginalized communities, whereas 'Other Castes' is representative of more privileged (socially, economically, politically etc) groups.
[193] Singh, Renu and Vennam, Uma, "Factors shaping trajectories to child and early marriage: Evidence from young lives in India", *Young Lives Working Paper* 149, pp. 1–36, May 2016.


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that is premised on endogamy, defying this structure and marrying outside one's caste is seen as a violation of tradition and brings great shame and dishonour upon the family and community.[194]

There are several consequences for marrying outside one's caste. At the community level, children and families face criticism and judgement for contravening the engrained social order, with inter-caste marriages being seen as a betrayal of one's caste and a threat to the survival of the caste system. At the family level, concerns regarding cultural compatibility, the diminishing of family traditions and the disregard for traditional values, means that inter-caste marriages are perceived negatively, which often results in forced separation of the couple by the family. However, girls in particular are more likely to be met with violence from their own families if they marry someone of a lower caste, or from their in-laws if they themselves are from a comparatively lower caste; this violence stems from the belief that marrying /having sexual relations with someone of a lower caste taints a person's "higher" status and reputation and violates a girl's purity, thus bringing dishonour to oneself and to one's family. [195]

Overall, the research did not find that COVID-19 had a definitive impact on the caste system as a driver of child marriage. However, the increased access to the internet and social media as a result of COVID-19 *(see section 4.2.4.2)*, meant that children were connecting with people from more diverse backgrounds than those to whom they were usually exposed, not only in terms of differing castes, but also different religious or ethnic backgrounds. COVID-19, therefore, created greater opportunity for inter-caste relationships to occur.

4.2.1.4 Conflict, climate change and natural disasters

Crises can heighten a child's vulnerability to early marriage. From familial death, harm and displacement caused by a crisis, to the ensuing damage, food shortages, economic impacts and disruption to services, such events amplify pre-existing drivers of child marriage and sometimes introduce new ones. A 2016 study found that "Nine of the top 10 countries with the highest rates of child marriage were considered fragile or conflict-affected states,"[196] which highlights the extent to which child marriage is adopted as a coping mechanism during crises.

Natural disasters are commonplace in the research locations and have been recognized as exacerbating the risk factors that drive child marriage.[197] These disasters, along with climate change impacts, have led to heightened risks of crop failure, food shortages, threats to physical security, little or unstable income and many other harmful impacts on communities. Climate disasters exacerbate existing drivers of child marriage, and this, paired with the effects of COVID-19, has led to a dual crisis that has intensified the suffering of affected communities. For example, in Sylhet City (Sylhet, Bangladesh), it was commonly noted that the 2022 floods had had a negative impact on families, increasing financial hardship, above and beyond the impacts of COVID-19. One mother lamented that "there is no end to suffering for us. First it was COVID, then the flood."[198] Indeed, many respondents in this location often struggled to consider the impact of COVID-19 on child marriage and their lives more generally, as the floods were more prominent for these communities. In such crises, families may be more likely to marry their

[194] KII with KIRDAP NGO, Kalikot, Karnali, Nepal (virtual), 28 January 2023.
[195] KII with NGO President, Aawaaj, Kathmandu, Nepal, 17 December 2022.
[195] Schlect, 2016, in UNFPA and UNICEF, *Child Marriage in Humanitarian Settings in South Asia.*
[197] UNFPA and UNICEF, *Child Marriage in Humanitarian Settings in South Asia.* For example, Nepal experienced a series of high-magnitude earthquakes in April 2015, which devastated communities and triggered catastrophic landslides, affecting over 8 million people. Flooding is frequent in India and Bangladesh, and both locations experienced extreme floods during the pandemic.
[198] Individual interview with parent/caregiver, female, 42 years, Muslim, Sylhet City, Sylhet, Bangladesh, 20 November 2022.

underage daughters to be relieved of the financial and social burden of caring for them, and to ensure their physical security in unstable settings.[199]

4.2.1.5 Conclusion

Entrenched restrictive social norms regarding gender are prevalent and perceptions of traditional male and female roles in the household have contributed to child marriage. While the COVID-19 pandemic has made it somewhat more acceptable for women to work outside the home, overall, restrictive gender norms that prescribe limited agency to girls remain entrenched across the research locations. COVID-19 had little impact on social and cultural beliefs relating to notions of childhood and readiness for child marriage; notions that are heavily informed by entrenched norms relating to gender roles and underpinned by religious beliefs and laws.

Fears surrounding pre-marital sexual activity by girls appear to have intensified during COVID-19. This, along with the increased scrutiny of girls' behaviour due to male family members being more present at home during the pandemic, appears to have compounded this driver.

Dowry practices also more intensified as a driver of child marriage during COVID-19, as young people were compelled or chose to marry. The changes in dowry practices were seen as a lucrative opportunity to either gain money (for the groom's family) or to pay a smaller dowry (for the bride's family).

COVID-19 did not have a definitive impact on the caste system as a driver of child marriage. However, the increased access of children to those from different castes and backgrounds through the internet and social media during COVID-19, and the resulting parental fear of self-initiated marriages, may have driven arranged marriages in some cases.

4.2.2 Community drivers

4.2.2.1 Educational access, attainment and outcomes

The literature indicates that child marriage is associated with a lack of access to education in communities, particularly among girls, though the nature of this association is variable and data is inconsistent. Some research suggests that higher levels of education are preventative of child marriage (particularly access to secondary education),[200] and girls with lower levels of education are more likely to be married in childhood.[201] For example, in Bangladesh, girls with only primary education were found to be 73.1 per cent more likely to be married before the age of 18 years compared with girls who have secondary or higher education.[202] In India, children who are not presently in school are 3.4 times more likely to be married than their peers who are in school.[203] Poor physical access to schools is often a reason to deter the transition from primary to secondary school, which can serve as a trigger for child marriage.[204]

However, the association between educational attainment and child marriage varies across the three countries under study. For instance, evidence based on an analysis of the India NFHS suggests that, from 2005–2006 to 2015–2016, the proportion of girls married below the age of 18 years declined across the board, irrespective of education level and wealth status.[205] Research also indicates that child marriage may be a reason for dropping out of school (though not the dominant reason).[206] Conversely, a lack of access to education can be a driver of child marriage.[207]

Although past research has struggled to determine a causal link between education and child marriage, one of the most prominent themes to arise in the present study was that school closures during COVID-19 were pivotal in driving child marriage. In all locations, it was clear that children's education had been severely hampered by school closures. Many girls did not return to schools when they reopened because they were married while schools were closed.[208] Disrupted education was described as a driver of both arranged and self-initiated marriages in several ways relating to internet access, increased financial hardship and prevailing gender norms.

[199] Pope D. et al, "What is the current evidence for the relationship between the climate and environmental crises and child marriage? A scoping review" *Global Public Health,* June 2022.
[200] Scott, S., et al. "Early marriage and early childbearing in South Asia: Trends, inequalities, and drivers from 2005 to 2018", Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences, 2020; Raj, A., "Cross-sectional time series analysis of associations between education and girl child marriage in Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan, 1991–2011", PLOS ONE, 9(9), September 2014.
[201] World Vision, *COVID-19 and Child Marriage; Shakya, D.V., "Prevalence and some correlates of child marriage in Kapilbatsu District, Nepal", Asian Journal of Population Sciences* 1(15), *2022, 11; Marphatia, A. et. Al.,* "The role of education in child and adolescent marriage in rural lowland Nepal", *Journal of Biological Science,* 1 April 2022, 1–17.
[202] Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics and UNICEF Bangladesh, *A scoping analysis of budget allocations for ending child marriage in Bangladesh,* 2018, p. 20.
[203] World Vision, *COVID-19 and Child Marriage.*
[204] Jejeebhoy, S.J., *Ending Child Marriage in India, Drivers and strategies. UNICEF, New Delhi, 2019; UNICEF and UNFPA, Child Marriage in South Asia: An evidence review.*
[205] Ibid.
[206] NHFS-5 (2019–2021) found that around seven per cent of girls and 0.3 per cent of boys reported getting married as a reason for dropping out of school: See Rampal, N., "Not distance or cost, but this is the main reason kids are dropping out of school NHFS-5 finds", 6 June 2022 <https://theprint.in/india/education/not-distance-or-cost-but-this-is-the-main-reason-kids-are-dropping-out-of-school-nfhs-5-finds/982403/>
[207] NFHS-5. p.70; Amin et al., 2014, in UNICEF and UNFPA, *Child Marriage in South Asia: An evidence review.*
[208] KII with UNFPA Adolescent and Youth Programme Manager, 7 December 2022.

It was commonly reported that schools attempted to maintain children's engagement in education through remote classes. However, many children did not have consistent access to remote learning, particularly when they had to share devices; in these instances, the education of boys was prioritized by parents. Additionally, in rural areas where internet coverage is limited, online education during school closures was not successful.[209]

> "COVID-19 has had an impact on education. Classes moved from face-to-face to online, but in households that do not have access to mobiles and laptops, [children] lost two years of education. Government school girls detached completely from education for almost two years... This led to a lot of dropouts. If girls are not enrolled in school, what do you think their parents would want? A girl child is not an asset to a family. She is a liability. Either she studies or she gets married."
>
> - Government Health Scheme Project Coordinator, Cachar, Assam, India, 21 November 2022.

Many girls directly attributed their marriages to school closures, reporting that proposals came when they were not in school during COVID-19, and there was no option but to marry.[210] This narrative relates to the gender norm wherein girls are seen as a burden and their main value is as a wife *(see section 4.2.1.2)*. Many parents and children stated that when girls were out of school due to COVID-19, they sat a home "doing nothing".[211] Other parents expressed the belief that accepting a good marriage proposal should take precedence over girls' return to education, as good proposals were rare, whereas girls could return to school at any point in the future.[212] Girls sometimes stated that marriage was always going to be unavoidable, but with the closure of schools marriage happened earlier in their lives.

> "School was the only reason and alternative that was saving girls like us from early marriages until now, but COVID-19 restrictions worsened this. Many parents took it as an opportunity to marry their girls off early."
>
> - FGD with adolescents, female, 12–18 years, Purnea, Bihar, India, 20 November 2022.

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[209] KII with UNICEF Nepal Child Protection Co-Ordinator, Kalikot, Karnali, Nepal, 5 December 2022; KII with Care Bangladesh Technical Co-ordinator, 9 December 2022.
[210] For example: Individual interview with married adolescent, female, 16 years, Hailakandi, Assam, India, 16 November 2022; Individual interview with married adolescent, female 17 years, Hailakandi, Assam, India, 17 November 2022; Individual interview with married adolescent, female, 17 years, Chapainawabganj, Rajshahi, Bangladesh, 20 November 2022.
[211] Individual interview with parent/caregiver of married child, male, 24 years, Gaibandha, Rangpur, Bangladesh, 23 November 2022.
[212] For example: Individual interview with parent/caregiver of married child, female, 40 years Purnea, Bihar, India, 22 November 2022; Individual interview with married adolescent, female, 16 years, Gaibandha, Rangpur, Bangladesh, 24 November 2022.

> "During COVID, I had to leave my school where I could never return. I wish I could have joined my school again. When I was at home, my marriage was decided by my parents. I am the eldest one and my parents wanted to lessen the burden because they have to prepare for my younger sisters' marriages. I could continue my school if Corona had not affected us."
>
> - A married adolescent, female, 17 years, Sheikhpura, Bihar, India, 14 November 2022.

Being out of education could be a catalyst for other drivers of child marriage. Social pressures, the desire to regulate girls' sexual activity and fear of self-initiated marriages, alongside increased financial pressures, resulted in parents arranging marriages for their daughters. Some parents reported that a fear of children engaging in "bad" behaviour due to having no education was a driver for child marriage. This was related to the perception that children would create trouble while not in school, and marriage was a way to keep them on the right path and out of harm's way.

> "The school closures also impacted [child marriage]. If girls aren't going to school, then girls aren't occupied and parents are scared the girls will be distracted and find love and bring shame on the family or be shamed or abused, so out of fear they are getting girls married. Girls are treated like an object. It is more about fear than actual action."
>
> - Adolescent and Youth Programme Analyst, UNFPA Bangladesh, 10 December 2022.

It was a commonly held belief among parents (and some adolescents) that girls lost motivation to continue education after a break during lockdown, and that their disinterest in education was a driver of child marriage, because it increased girls' focus on marriage. While the majority of married girls indicated a desire to remain in education, some reported falling in love while being unable to engage in education or training, showing how disrupted education did, in some circumstances, lead to self-initiated marriages.

> "I fell in love during the second lockdown. I was doing beautician training, but because of lockdown, school closed. So, I went back to my house far away [from school]. Then I started talking to my husband and fell in love."
>
> - A married adolescent, female, 19 years, Surkhet, Karnali, Nepal, 9 December 2022.

In all locations, even once schools were open, due to the increased financial hardships faced by families, parents could no longer afford to send their daughters to school. Rather than keeping their daughters at home, they perceived their best option to be arranging a marriage. The cost of schooling was a particularly prominent theme in Sheikhpura (Bihar, India), where most married and unmarried girls said that their parents could not afford the fees of private schools after COVID-19, while public schools were inaccessible. Additionally, when parents faced financial hardship as a result of COVID-19, they prioritized their sons' education over their daughters', due to the perception that girls' education would not improve the economic circumstances for the family and was thus a "waste of time".[213]

> "In an economic crisis in a family – when the parents have to choose between the demands of the family, when it comes to girls or boys – they don't prioritize the demands or rights of girls. In a normal situation, when they can afford to send one child to school, they prioritize boys. Boys go to school and, in that case, girls drop out of school. When COVID happened, they did the same; [they] deprioritized the girls' demands or issues. When schools reopened, girls didn't get the chance to join school again."
>
> - Technical Coordinator, CARE Bangladesh, Dhaka, 9 December 2022.

Some children (particularly in Udaipur, Rajasthan, India) highlighted that they fell behind on schoolwork as a result of prolonged school closures. As children failed their exams they were unable to continue their education. Shame around this failure and pressure from parents meant that girls were unable to retake their exams, and their only option to make their parents proud was to get

[213] Individual interview with married youth, female, 20 years, Sawai Madhopur, Rajasthan, India, 7 December 2022.

married. This narrative was also supported by parents, who reported being unwilling to fund their daughters' education after academic failure.

The link between educational access and child marriage was also evidenced for boys during COVID-19. Increased financial hardship meant that many boys did not go back to school once they reopened. Instead, they moved into the workforce to try to reduce the financial hardship inflicted on their families by COVID-19. This placed boys in an economically responsible position, which appears to have fuelled early marriage.

However, it was not always the case that reduced access to education during COVID-19 was a driver of child marriage. Although rare, there were also some examples of girls remaining in education after marrying during COVID-19.[214] Moreover, many married girls indicated that they had never been to school or were out of education prior to COVID-19. This was particularly the case in rural areas, where the distance from school was a barrier for girls' access to education; Cachar, Hailakandi (both Assam, India) and Udaipur (Bihar, India) seemed to have the most references to a lack of education facilities, irrespective of COVID-19.[215]

Overall, a lack of access to education was one of the most predominant drivers of child marriage during COVID-19. However, it was clear that arranged marriage, in particular, was strongly correlated with increased poverty during COVID-19. Harmful gender norms that place a low value on girls' education and see girls' value primarily as a wife, resulting in the regulation of girls' sexuality, remained an important driver of arranged marriage.

4.2.2.2 Limited access to economic opportunities

Prior to COVID-19, limited economic opportunities for girls was a driver of child marriage in Bangladesh, India and Nepal.[216] Girls and women have limited access to labour markets on account of rigid gender norms that restrict their ability to access mixed-sex settings for fear of this resulting in romantic relationships or sexual abuse, along with social norms that devalue their contributions to society.[217] A higher proportion of young women aged 18–24 years than young men in South Asia are not in education, training or employment.[218] Prior to COVID-19, girls had limited ability to access skills, training and secure employment opportunities away from home, which increased their exposure to poorly paid and insecure economic activities.[219]

The change in economic opportunities during COVID-19 was a dominant theme relating to the marriage of boys. It was commonly reported that boys entered the workforce during COVID-19 to support their families who were experiencing financial hardship. Almost all married males interviewed in this study entered employment during COVID-19, and several reported that they did not return to school upon reopening, but continued to work and earn. The link between income generation for boys and child marriage was strongly linked to the belief that when boys are able to provide for females financially, they are deemed able to "bear the responsibilities of marriage".[220]

Although limited in number, there were also examples of how COVID-19 resulted in income-generating opportunities for girls. For instance, several unmarried girls in the FGDs indicated that COVID-19 resulted in parents keeping girls out of school in order to work. There were also reports of girls using their phones for marketing opportunities and to establish businesses through social media. However, this was uncommon, and it cannot be determined whether girls' employment served as a buffer to child marriage during COVID-19. The vast majority of girls interviewed for this research were not working, and perceptions in the community were that girls' employment does not impact on the likelihood of girls getting married. Income-generating activities during COVID-19 tended to be more commonly availed by mothers and already-married women than girls at risk of early marriage.

When asked about the work girls did during COVID-19, it was common for girls and parents to refer automatically to unpaid labour within the home. Insights on female income-generating activities often required further prompting and clarification, indicating that this remains a relatively rare phenomenon. Those married when boys were better able to discuss the economic challenges faced during COVID-19, as they were more directly involved in income generation.

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[214] Individual interview with married adolescent, female, 18 years, Bagerhat, Khulna, Bangladesh, 28 November 2022.

[215] Individual interview with married adolescent, 19 years, Cachar, Assam, India, 23 November 2022; Individual interview with married adolescent, female, 17 years, Cachar, Assam, India, 23 November 2022; Individual interview with married adolescent, female, 19 years, Cachar, Assam, India, 24 November 2022; Individual interview with married adolescent, female, 19 years, Cachar, Assam, India, 21 November 2022; FGD parents/caregivers, female, Hailakandi, Assam, India, 14 November 2022; FGD with adolescents, female, 12-17 years, Udaipur, Rajasthan, India, 13 January 2023.

[216] UNICEF and UNFPA, *Child Marriage in South Asia: An evidence review.*

[217] Jejeebhoy, S.J., "Ending Child Marriage in India".

[218] Ibid.

[219] Ibid.

[220] Individual interview with married adolescent, female, 19 years, Dhanusha, Madhesh Province, Nepal, 11 December 2022; Individual interview with married youth, male, 20 years, Dhanusha, Madhesh Province, Nepal, 13 December 2022; Individual interview with married youth, male, 20 years, Purnea, Bihar, India, 22 November 2022.

There were rare instances of girls who had been involved in agricultural wage labour prior to COVID-19, and then were either unable to work or were not paid for their labour during the pandemic.[221] However, girls who reported being unable to earn during COVID-19 did not see this as the reason for their marriage, although general community attitudes suggest that people viewed a lack of economic opportunities for girls during COVID-19 as a driver of child marriage.

4.2.2.3 Social and peer group pressures

Child marriage is perpetuated by deeply entrenched social norms favouring patriarchal views of gender roles and family honour *(see section 4.2.1.2)*. The pressure to adhere to these norms arises due to the real or perceived reaction from the community and social groups in the event of deviation. Multiple studies have demonstrated that pressure to adhere to social norms overrides evidence about the harmful effects of child marriage.[222] According to the literature, families that deviate from the norm by delaying the age at which their children marry face a constant barrage of verbal abuse, questioning and rumours about the reason for this decision.[223] Conversely, emerging evidence based primarily on evaluations or observations of interventions aimed at preventing child marriage suggests that social support networks and community mobilization programmes (which engage leaders in communities to address child marriage) can be protective against child marriage. [224]

Findings from this study show that community and peer group pressure remained a common driver of child marriage during COVID-19. A consistent narrative in all research locations outlined how parents face social pressures from their communities to marry their children by a certain age, with these factors being linked to gender norms and the prevalent view of girls being ready for marriage from a young age.

There were relatively few examples of how this driver changed as a result of COVID-19. Even when stating that lockdowns meant people were more distant from those in their community, respondents did not believe that this contributed to child marriage practices. The main finding about the COVID-19 context in relation to social pressure was the social stigma against children who engage in love marriages.

Parental fear of children eloping (which was highlighted as a driver of arranged marriage during COVID-19) was linked to fears of being judged and treated badly by others in the community. The general attitude across locations was that girls who elope are rejected by communities and society. It was a common perception that families of girls who elope would be shamed, forced to leave the village or ostracized by their community. A fear of reduced social status as a result of child elopement appears to be a key driver for arranged marriages. Parents also believed that children are susceptible to social pressures and a desire to be like their peers. This view was supported by several girls in Nepal (Kalikot and Surkhet, both in Karnali), who stated that seeing their friends engaging in self-initiated marriages was a reason for their own decision to marry,[225] although this was not commonly reported in other research locations.

When asked why parents might have arranged marriages for their children during COVID-19, pressure from neighbours to marry their daughters was commonly noted. Respondents reported that neighbours would gossip and place pressure on parents to arrange a marriage for their daughters once they hit puberty and come "of age", and that there is a social stigma against parents who wait until their children are older to arrange their marriage. A desire to be perceived positively in society, to achieve social status and to maintain family honour in the community were drivers of arranged marriages. Parents also reported feeling pressure to marry their children (boys and girls) once they saw others in the community marrying children the same age or younger. Indeed, parents indicated that they would force their daughters to marry to avoid stigmatization in the community.

> "But if the girl says no, then the family will face many challenges. Everyone in the community will treat us badly and we will not be able to get another groom for our daughter. If she does not agree then we also know that she might have a relationship with someone else, which is not good but we have to find this person and try to arrange a marriage with him. We also might have to convince and harass the daughter so that she gives consent to the marriage that we have arranged, otherwise our family will be shamed."
>
> - A parent/caregiver of married child, female, 43 years, Hailakandi, Assam, India, 18 November 2022.

[221] Individual interview with married adolescent, female, 17 years, Rautahat, Madhesh Province, Nepal, 5 December 2022; FGD with parents/caregivers, female, Sheikhpura, Bihar, India, 15 November 2022.
[222] See for instance: Jejeebhoy, S.J., "Ending Child Marriage in India"; UNICEF and BBS, *Ending Child Marriage in Bangladesh, What Matters for Change? Exploring preferences, beliefs and norms: A discussion paper,* 2018, p. 23.
[223] Jejeebhoy, S.J., "Ending Child Marriage in India".
[224] Ibid.
[225] For example: Individual interview with married adolescent, female, 18 years, Surkhet, Karnali, Nepal, 8 December 2022.


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Respondents identified certain individuals who play a key role in arranging marriages in the community and in fuelling social pressures. For example, in Bagerhat, respondents commonly made reference to go-betweens, individuals within the community who assum the role of arranging marriages. In relation to COVID-19, some people in Bagerhat suggested that restrictions meant that go-betweens could not visit people's houses to support the arrangement of marriages or carry out matchmaking activities, resulting in fewer child marriages in the community. However, others stated that go-betweens continued to carry out their role remotely over the phone, suggesting that the role of key social actors in driving child marriage was not substantially reduced by COVID-19.

It was very rare for people to report that members of the community can prevent child marriage. Conversely, the general consensus in all research locations was that few individuals would be willing to report or speak out to prevent child marriage, because they would be perceived negatively in society and they wanted to avoid conflict in the community. There were examples of influential individuals within the community supporting child marriage, or not enforcing child marriage laws in order to maintain their positive social standing in the community.[226]

4.2.2.4 Restrictions on ceremonies and registration of marriages

One driver of child marriage to emerge as a result of COVID-19 was the legal restriction on marriage ceremonies during lockdown. Legally, during COVID-19, wedding ceremonies either could not take place or had limits on the number of attendees in order to prevent the spread of COVID-19. However, across research locations, findings indicated that lockdown restrictions rarely resulted in weddings and child marriages being prevented.

A dominant theme was that, during COVID-19, marriages continued to take place in secret ceremonies at night and in small ceremonies or minimal gatherings. Lockdown restrictions meant small ceremonies could be "hidden" from communities, therefore increasing the number of marriages that could take place. Interestingly, some participants reported that they travelled to rural areas where weddings were less easily interrupted (despite travel restrictions). There were examples where children were married during lockdown in small ceremonies, with a bigger celebration taking place after restrictions were eased.

> "Both of us married under the legal age in Bangladesh. It was an unregistered child marriage. As our families were informed and arranged the wedding, we went to a distant relative's home far from our locality so that no one could be informed or can put any obstacle in the marriage. The *kazi* [marriage registrar] came; he took the papers and noted down all the information, and said after two-three years, we will get our legalized marriage certificates and documents."
>
> - A married adolescent, female, 16 years, Chapainawabganj, Rajshahi, Bangladesh, 22 November 2022.

[226] KII with Local Union Council Member, Chapainawabganj, Rajshahi, Bangladesh, 20 November 2022.

It was also commonly noted that the COVID-19 restrictions prohibiting marriage ceremonies were a driver of child marriage. Due to the financial hardship families were facing during COVID-19, the prospect of saving money on a marriage ceremony was appealing to parents, meaning more parents arranged marriages for their children during lockdowns when going without a large ceremony provided substantial cost savings.

> "We got a good proposal and so my family agreed. Also, because there was a lockdown, we did not have to invite a lot of people and that saved a lot of money for my family. I was not going to school. I have never gone to school and girls don't go out to do jobs here... I think my family was struggling with finances, so it was a good opportunity for them to get me married during the lockdown.
> People were not allowed to have big weddings at that time, so it worked out for us."
>
> - A married adolescent, female, 19 years, Cachar, Assam, India, 23 November 2022.

There were frequent reports in all locations that registrars continued to knowingly register child marriages during COVID-19. The main reasons for this seem to be financial benefits for registrars (who were also facing financial hardship due to the pandemic), social pressure to keep the community happy and religious laws taking precedence over national child marriage laws. However, many reported that registrars often marry children unknowingly, because families have falsified birth registration documents, increasing the age on children's birth certificates or identity cards.

> "My marriage was held in the kazi office [marriage registry office]; there were 40–50 people at the wedding. The witnesses were the parents. **[Did they ask for ID to prove your age?]** In our country, there are different kinds of systems to do the paperwork. So, we increased our age on the birth certificate. I don't know much about it, it's probably the elders who did it. They somehow got it done."
>
> - A married youth, male, 20 years, Bagerhat, Khulna, Bangladesh, 28 November 2022.

It was common for children in Bangladesh to report that their wedding ceremonies took place in mosques or kazi offices during COVID-19, with a small number of family members. In some instances, children reported that the *kazi* came to their home to register the marriage during lockdown.[227]

Another common theme was that child marriages were often not registered. In these instances, children were not legally married, but a ceremony took place before a religious leader, and the community and the family considered the children to be married. Children in rural areas were particularly likely to have unregistered marriages.

4.2.2.5 (Restricted) access to services and prevention programmes

Existing preliminary and anecdotal evidence from the early phases of COVID-19 (prior to this study's data collection) indicated that pandemic-related restrictions on delivery and access to services to prevent and respond to child marriage may have served as a driver of child marriage. Early evidence indicated that COVID-19 prevented the provision of a range of services, including social welfare services provided by caseworkers and outreach workers, health-care services, mental health and psychosocial support services, SRH care and information, as well as services related to gender-based violence. It was suggested that such disruptions may have created challenges in reporting child marriage to the police and difficulties in accessing services, including modern contraception, resulting in unintended pregnancies and child marriage.[228]

In each of the research locations, a range of services and programmes exist to support the prevention of child marriage. These include primary prevention initiatives, typically implemented by NGOs, that aim to address various determinants of child marriage, through community awareness-raising initiatives, adolescent circles/girls clubs, economic empowerment programmes and health outreach programmes. In addition, services and professionals such as police officers (including specialist gender and/or child desks in police stations), administrative officers, social welfare/child protection officers, shelters and helplines are in place to provide response services aimed at preventing individual cases of child marriage and/or supporting individual children who are at risk of or have undergone a child marriage.

Key informants who participated in the research identified substantial challenges to implementing programmes and providing services during COVID-19. Most prominently, COVID-19-related lockdowns, movement restrictions and testing and other requirements heavily restricted the ability for service providers to function effectively. While those

[227] Individual interview with a married adolescent, female, 17 years, Bagerhat, Khulna, Bangladesh, 29 November 2022.
[228] UNICEF,

professionals who were working in designated essential services were permitted to continue their work, their capacity was nonetheless limited by staff absences, movement restrictions and COVID-19 requirements such testing. Other services, including child protection/social welfare and primary prevention services were required, at least during the more restrictive lockdown periods, to suspend services and move to alternative modes of delivery, including remote or hybrid models. Challenges arose in this move to remote and hybrid models, due to the need to learn new delivery modalities and the limited access of girls to the internet and mobile phones in some locations. These challenges limited the ability of service providers – who would normally be in a position to receive reports of child marriages or children at risk of child marriage – to receive and respond to these cases. A more general challenge reported by a range of key informants was that COVID-19 heavily impacted on government priorities. Due to the reallocation of human and financial resources to support COVID-19 efforts, it was not possible to provide services effectively. This finding emerged from national-level stakeholders, along with service providers at the local levels, with key staff redirected into COVID-19 public health efforts and distributing emergency relief.

The limitations on children's and community members' access to services was also noted as a challenge that arose due to COVID-19. Across the research locations, many local government offices remained closed. Even though police stations and hospitals remained open during lockdowns, travel restrictions prevented people from travelling to service centres to access support. Key informants described adolescents and families as being cut off from services that might have helped to identify and prevent child marriage, causing child marriages to happen "secretly". it was also difficult to access girls via mobile phone.

> "Workers were trying to reach girls over the phone so the girls could have the support system, so if anything happened that the girls didn't want, they have that linkage to get support or referrals for where they can go. But most girls don't have a phone, it's a family phone so they don't always have access. We tried sending SMS to girls, we would send encouraging messages to say "we are here if you want to talk" but later when we met the girls and asked if it helped the girls never saw the messages because it was their dad's phone."
>
> - Adolescent and Youth Programme Analyst, UNFPA Bangladesh, 10 December 2022.

Some participants reported that calls to helplines increased during COVID-19, due to the inability to access other service providers.

However, despite the significant effect that the COVID-19 context had on the availability and access to services, it is not clear whether this had any meaningful impact on child marriage rates and practices, given the limited access to effective prevention and response services prior to COVID-19.

> "There was not much help available before the COVID situation; thus, COVID had no impact on people's access to help and services."
>
> - FGD with adolescents, female, 13 – 15 years, Chapainawabganj, Rajshahi, Bangladesh, 20 November 2022.

> "There are no services to help people forced into marriage or child marriage. There has not been any, and there is no service presently to help people forced into marriages under the minimum age. And the COVID situation had no impact on the availability of any such services."
>
> - A parent/caregiver of married child, female, 30 years, Gaibandha, Rangpur, Bangladesh, 23 November 2022.

Challenges in accessing services to prevent and respond to child marriage were considerable even prior to the pandemic, suggesting that COVID-19-related restrictions on accessing services may not have had a meaningful impact on child marriage practices. For instance, in participatory FGDs with adolescent and parents/caregivers, participants were presented with a hypothetical scenario about a 35-year-old wealthy man who marries a 15-year-old girl after arranging the marriage with the girl's very poor parents. Respondents asked where the girl could turn to for help in preventing the marriage. The responses demonstrated the very limited access that children had, prior to COVID-19, to options to prevent marriage. In research locations in Bangladesh and India, participants tended to report that a child could seek help from friends or neighbours, while others reported that there would be no help available if her parents had decided for her. It appears that the normalization of arranged marriage, together with stigma against children going against the wishes of their parents, is an enduring

barrier to accessing prevention and response services and one that can, in extreme cases, lead to violence against the girl and even death. It appears that cases of child marriage are not frequently reported to authorities as the community members feel societal pressure to stay loyal to each other. People who work on responding to child marriages may feel that they cause more harm than good to the families as they do not have long-term solutions for their issues.

> "Girls would probably not go to seek legal help because law enforcement would just want to make a mutual understanding and fix the problem between the couple or the family. They would ask the girl to explain her reasons but then nothing else would happen."
>
> - Adolescent and Youth Programme Analyst, UNFPA Bangladesh, 21 November 2022.

In Nepal, participants presented more options in terms of accessing services and support in the case of a proposed child marriage. An affected child could approach friends and neighbours, village leaders, the helpline, the ward/ municipality office, NGOs or the police (however, in the exercise, police were typically categorized as "inaccessible" across the different research locations). The reason for this is perhaps due to the higher involvement of children in decision-making relating to child marriage in Nepal, and that, in comparison to India and Bangladesh, arranged and forced marriages are not as widespread or normalized. Therefore, it is likely that COVID-19-related restrictions on accessing services may have had more impact on cases of child marriage in Nepal.

4.2.2.6 Conclusion

Multiple community-level drivers of child marriage were exacerbated by or at least remained prevalent during COVID-19. These include: a lack of access to education, meaning parents felt the best option for girls was to have them married due to prevailing gender norms surrounding the low value of girls and the view that they are a burden in the home; more boys entering the workforce early and being deemed as responsible enough to provide for a wife; a ban on large marriage ceremonies during COVID-19 driving small, secret ceremonies to save money; and the continued registration and support of child marriage by influential individuals in the community. Social pressures from individuals in the community to marry girls young and a reluctance to report child marriages occurring in the community remained relevant during COVID-19.

Despite the significant effect that the COVID-19 context had on the availability and access to prevention and response services, it is not clear if this had any meaningful impact on child marriage rates and practices, given the limited access to effective prevention and response services even prior to the pandemic.

4.2.3 Family and relationship drivers

4.2.3.1 Family poverty

Household poverty weighed heavily in decision-making on child marriage in South Asia long before COVID-19. According to the literature, owing to the fact dowry rises with age, girls are perceived as increasingly financially burdensome to the household as they grow older *(see section 4.2.1.2)*, and poorer families are less equipped to resist financial pressure to marry daughters off at an early age.[229] Once married, the financial responsibility of a girl is transferred to the groom's family, leaving her natal family with "one less mouth to feed."[230] Marriage is perceived by many families to be in their daughter's best interests and the only route to securingan economically stable future for them. Taken together, these factors motivate families to pursue marriage for girls as a "household strategy to mitigate potential risks associated with raising children in a volatile socio-economic context."[231] Family poverty has also been cited as influencing rates of child marriage among boys, as financial pressures encourage parents to marry sons off early to obtain the dowry income to support the household.[232]

These findings are not universal; past research in some South Asian contexts has identified a greater incidence of child marriage among households in higher wealth brackets,[233] demonstrating that factors other than economic status may be more influential in determining a child's vulnerability to risk. Furthermore, familial poverty may in some instances be a protective factor for girls if the family is unable to pay any dowry whatsoever.[234] These cases appear to be exceptions to the general trend in light of strong evidence across the three countries of household poverty as a predictor of children marrying before they turn 18. In Nepal, 45.2 per cent of women aged 20–24 years in the lowest wealth quintile were married before the age of 18, compared to only 18 per cent in the highest.[235] In Bangladesh, rates of child marriage are 81.4 per cent in the lowest wealth quintile compared to 53.2 per cent in the highest, yet rates for the poorest wealth quintile are as high as 100 per cent in certain regions (Dhaka).[236] In India, the percentage of women aged 20–24 years who were married before the age of 18 is over four times higher for those in the poorest wealth quintile (over 40 per cent), compared to the highest (around 10 per cent).[237]

The qualitative data collected for this study indicates that economic insecurity caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and resultant lockdowns exacerbated the significance of household poverty as a driver of child marriage. Across all countries, respondents explained that financial stress on the family created a sense of urgency for parents to marry their daughters to alleviate their household outgoings. Many of the stories shared depict parents' decision to marry their daughters as a survival strategy in the face of economic hardship. The phrase "one less mouth to feed" cropped up repeatedly, as did indications that parents had little choice in the context of significant financial stress.

[229] See, for example: University of Dhaka and UNFPA, *Context of Child Marriage and its Complications in Bangladesh.*
[230] Human Rights Watch, *Marry Before Your House is Swept Away: Child marriage in Bangladesh*, 2015.
[231] United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), *Key Drivers of the Changing Prevalence of Child Marriage in Three Countries in South Asia: Working Paper,* UNICEF, Kathmandu, 2018.
[232] United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), *Child Marriage in Humanitarian Settings in South Asia: Policy Brief,* UNICEF EAPRO and UNICEF ROSA, June 2021.
[233] Amin et al., 2014, in UNICEF and UNFPA, *Child Marriage in South Asia: An evidence review.*
[234] United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), *Child Marriage in Humanitarian Settings: The Rohingya community in Bangladesh, Policy Brief,* June 2021.
[235] Nepal MICS 2019, p.394.
[236] University of Dhaka, Context of Child Marriage and its Implications in Bangladesh, 2018, p.97.
[237] *Statistical Profile on Child Marriage: India,* 2022.

"[Has this type of situation, i.e. a younger girl forced to marry an older man become more common during COVID?] Yes. **[Why?]** Because during COVID there was more scarcity of food or money and [marriage] was a better option than for the girl to stay starving and die."

- FGD with parents/caregivers, female, 26–65 years, Sylhet City, Sylhet, Bangladesh, 22 November 2022.

[Have you noticed more young girls getting married since COVID?] Yes, I heard of a 13-year-old. I know someone who was 11. **[Do you know why they were married off?]** There are two aspects. Because education was stopped during COVID, and because poverty meant we couldn't survive if we didn't reduce mouths to feed."

- FGD with parents/caregivers, female, 30–40 years, Bagerhat, Khulna, Bangladesh, 27 November 2022.

Marriage was described as a survival strategy by girls, too. An illustrative example was provided by a 17-year-old girl in Surkhet (Karnali, Nepal), who was married at the age of 16 to her husband, who was 22 at the time. When asked how COVID-19 impacted her life, she explained how her father's inability to work during the pandemic led to a financial crisis in her natal household. She viewed her family's financial situation and resulting inability to provide for her as a problem that could be resolved through marriage, and one she could take responsibility for solving on her own.

"Due to corona, my father couldn't go to work and there was a financial crisis in the family. To remove myself from that crisis, I chose another way. **[Was your husband still able to work? Was he in a more financially stable situation?]** Yes, he was financially strong enough for me at that time."

- A married adolescent, female, 17 years, Surkhet, Karnali, Nepal, 7 December 2022.

Afraid of the potential repercussions of being underage, the couple married informally. While her parents were initially unhappy with her decision, and the elopement caused a temporary estrangement, as time passed they accepted the union and contact between them resumed. Similar stories and sentiments, emphasizing girls' agency and intentionality in marrying to better their prospects, were expressed by other girls and boys, many from the same research site (Surkhet).

"Due to COVID, people had a lot of economic problems at home. Young girls might think that if they get married, they might have better life or have more supportive partner/ family. The other family might be able to provide better. Scarcity led to marriage."

- FGD with adolescents, female, 14-17 years, Surkhet, Karnali, Nepal, 10 December 2022.

"Due to low economic status, girls especially will not get what they need or get enough basic resources i.e., food or clothes. Life is hard for them, so they might think that if they marry, they will be free of this and have a better life."

- FGD with adolescents, female, 14-17 years, Surkhet, Karnali, Nepal, 10 December 2022.

Another dynamic involved girls who felt obliged to marry in order to resolve the financial situation of their natal family, viewing this as their duty or responsibility. An 18-year-old woman from Purnea, India, explained how, when she was 16 years old, her union was arranged by her father with the sole purpose of relieving the family's financial stress. COVID-19 had had a devastating impact on the household income and attempts to take out loans to tide them over were unsuccessful. Her now-husband's family had offered 100,000 rupees (US$ 1,200) and, despite her aversion to the union, she agreed, because of: "our poor financial condition and need for money at that time…I also agreed to the decision as it was in favour of our family."[238] She considered COVID-19 to be the sole catalyst for her marriage; that she would not be in this situation had the pandemic not happened.[239] Data collected from Purnea (Bihar, India) suggests that this was not an exceptional

[238] Individual interview with married adolescent, female, 18 years, Purnea, Bihar, India, 20 November 2022.
[239] United Nations, "Policy Brief: The impact of COVID-19 on women".

case but reflects a trend of young girls being married to older men – often from Uttar Pradesh – who could pay a reasonably high bride price during the pandemic. This money was used by parents to overcome the financial impact of COVID-19. The men were generally middle-aged, while the girls who were married were as young as 13, even younger in some instances.

> "**[What is the youngest age a person has been married to your knowledge?]** A 12-year-old girl was married in our nearby village to a 40-year-old man... The girl's father was not there. So, her mother was the only earning member and she decided to get her daughter married because the man was offering 50,000 to the girl's family..."
>
> - FGD with adolescents, female, 12-18 years, Purnea, Bihar, India, 23 November 2022.

That girls are obliged or duty-bound to shoulder the responsibility for the financial stress of the family was articulated by a range of research participants, not just by girls themselves. When presented with a scenario about a 15-year-old girl who is pressured by her parents to marry a 35-year-old man against her will because he is rich and they cannot afford to take care of her anymore, a group of fathers of every age from Sylhet City (Sylhet, Bangladesh) agreed that the girl should marry.

> "There is no other way left for her."
>
> "She should accept the marriage to improve the situation for the family."
>
> "Yes, she needs to accept because of money. It's only logical."
>
> "If not for the financial crisis, if it wasn't for this, nobody would be marrying their daughter."
>
> - FGD with parents/caregivers, male, 23–90 years, Sylhet City, Sylhet, Bangladesh, 21 November 2022.

Though less frequently, boys also spoke of shouldering the responsibility to marry for dowry to relieve their family's financial stress. Yet many participants also highlighted that boys have a greater ability to financially support the family, and sons are perceived as less financially burdensome than daughters, which offsets the pressure and desirability for them to marry at a young age.[240] Taking these factors into account, it appears that economic insecurity and poverty caused by COVID-19 had a less clear influence on the marriage of boys than of girls.

> "**[Which types of marriages went up (during COVID-19)?]** Arranged marriages. Maybe because of financial reasons, because there are a lot of expenses for a girl, her education, her clothes and other maintenance expenses which the parents feel like somebody else can care for her. **[Is taking care of a boy not expensive? Why do you think they marry girls and not boys?]** Parents consider the material aspect more. The boy will grow up and earn a living to take care of them. Girls have to get married anyway, so why not now."
>
> - FGD with adolescents, female, 12-14 years, Bagerhat, Khulna, Bangladesh, 27 November 2022.

Some respondents felt that the economic impacts of COVID-19 had not affected the rate of child marriage, highlighting that poverty has always been a determinant of child marriage and little had changed since the onset of the pandemic.[241] This tended to be articulated in rural locations, where participants were better able to buffer themselves against the negative economic impacts of COVID-19. For instance, in Bangladesh, it was highlighted that rural agriculture (the country's dominant sector) was not affected by COVID-19 to the same extent as other sectors, such that the economic impact on child marriage was thought to be marginal.[242] Yet many instances provided by research participants in each of the three countries show that the pandemic increased household economic vulnerability to the extent that many families had to take out loans to meet the basic needs of the family.[243]

[240] FGD with adolescents, female, 12–14 years, Bagerhat, Khulna, Bangladesh, 27 November 2022; FGD with adolescents, male, 14–17 years, Bagerhat, Khulna, Bangladesh, 30 November 2022.
[241] Individual interview with married adolescent, 18 years, Rautahat, Madhesh Province, Nepal, 6 December 2022; KII with UNICEF SPEAR, Dhaka, Bangladesh, 16 November 2022
[242] KII with UNICEF SPEAR, Dhaka, Bangladesh, 16 November 2022.
[243] Many participants, including: Individual interview with caregivers of married girl, 25 years, female, 21 November 2022; FGD parents/caregivers, male, Rautahat, Madhesh, Nepal, 12 May 2022; Individual interview with married girl, 19 years old, Cachar, Assam, India, 23 November 2022; Individual interview with married adolescent, female, 18 years, Purnea, Bihar, India, 20 November 2022.

4.2.3.2 Familial duty and parental pressure

In line with previous evidence,[244] the study findings indicate that familial duty and parental pressure endure as a dominant reason why many young people get married across the research locations, with a prevailing view that parents know what is best for their children and that it would be disrespectful for children to disobey. While COVID-19 may have increased the frequency of self-initiated marriages in some locations, arranged marriages continue to be the most prevalent and accepted form of union *(see section 4.1)*.

Relieving household finances is a significant reason parents choose to marry their children but a complex interplay of reasons commonly fuel these decisions alongside economic factors. Often, parents emphasized that the decision was made in their children's best interests, and motivated solely by the intention to ensure a stable, secure and happy future for them. Beyond finances, the traits that parents said they look out for in a partner for their child include good character, family background,[246] education level,[247] and stability and maturity. When an appropriate or desirable suitor is presented or identified, parents are eager to finalize the marriage so as not to waste the good opportunity.[248]

Adolescents, particularly girls, exhibited a strong desire to appease their parents by respecting and fulfilling their wishes regarding their marriage. When asked about the consequences of denying their parents' wishes, responses were mixed but there was a prevailing view that girls are less likely than boys to disobey but also more likely than boys to be punished or reprimanded if they did so.

> "I had to marry just to make my parents happy otherwise I would not have done it."
>
> - A married adolescent, female, 19 years, Cachar, Assam, India, 21 November 2022.

[244] Previous studies have shown parental pressure and familial duty to be a significant determinant of child marriage in South Asia. In one study in Nepal, 53.3 per cent of young female respondents cited "caregivers' desire" as the reason they married, compared to 26.4 per cent reporting "self-desire". See: Central Department of Population Studies (CDPS), Tribhuvan University (TU), *Situation Assessment of Child Marriage in Selected Five Intervention Districts of Nepal*, Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, 2017, table 2.7.
[245] FGD with adolescents, female, 13–16 years, Sylhet City, Sylhet, Bangladesh, 21 November 2022.
[246] FGD with parents/caregivers, male, 23–90 years, Sylhet City, Sylhet, Bangladesh, 21 November 2022.
[247] Individual Interview with married girl, 19 years, Dhanusha, Madhesh Province, Nepal, 12 December 2022.
[248] KII with UNICEF Education, Dhaka, Bangladesh, 7 December 2022.

"In my case, I left it up to my parents to find a groom for me. I would always accept whoever they brought. The man they found I got married to. **[Would you liked to have chosen your own husband?]** No."

- A married adolescent, female, 17 years, Sylhet City, Sylhet, Bangladesh, 21 November 2022.

"[What would you do if your daughter did not accept the man you chose for her? [...]] I will hit her and make her understand that I want the best for her. If they don't listen to their parents, who would they listen to? For boys, there is nothing we can do. We can talk to him and convince him. Ultimately, it is his choice to bring home a wife."

- FGD with parents/caregivers, male, 36–49 years, Hailakandi, Assam, India, 15 November 2022.

4.2.3.3 Family size and composition

Past research has shown that child marriage rates in South Asia differ by family composition in several ways, all of which seem to be related in some way to family or household income. An increase in the number of household members and/or children is associated with increased vulnerability to child marriage.[249] Moreover, while in Bangladesh and Nepal, households headed by males are more likely to have a girl married before the age of 18 than households headed by females,[250] this trend is the opposite in India.[251]

Data from the present study strongly indicate that COVID-19 increased the vulnerability of children from larger households to child marriage.

Economic insecurity triggered by the pandemic meant families opted to marry children young as a strategic decision to ease the burden on the family. Respondents repeatedly noted that families with many children were more likely to marry their children because the larger the household, the greater the need for resources for daily survival. Interestingly, many respondents, particularly those in Nepal, considered families with multiple daughters to be the most under pressure to marry their children and most likely to try to pursue marriage for all their daughters at the earliest opportunity.

"If someone has many daughters, then they hurry to get them married as soon as possible to fulfil their responsibilities on time."

- Representative, Life Nepal, Dhanusha, Madhesh, Nepal, 12 December 2023.

"Parents decided the marriage of the pair. Both the parents were uneducated and poor, and were under pressure to marry them earlier due to many daughters in the family."

- FGD with parents/caregivers, male, no ages provided, Rautahat, Madhesh, Nepal, 5 December 2022.

In Sawai Madhopur (Rajasthan, India), an emerging dynamic mentioned by multiple research participants was the decision of parents to marry two or more sisters at the same time in order to save on wedding expenses. Participants explained that families whose incomes had been impacted by COVID-19 could not afford the expense of multiple weddings; when a suitable match was found for the eldest daughter, arrangements would be made to marry the younger ones at the same time, regardless of their age or readiness for marriage. Concerningly, one participant had heard of a situation where a four-year-old girl was married at the same time as her 18-year-old sister.[252]

[249] Policy Brief: Bangladesh 2018 Child Marriage in Bangladesh, An exploration of preferences, beliefs and norms. "Child Marriage in Bangladesh: An exploration of preferences, beliefs and norms – Policy brief on ending child marriage", unpublished internal document, 2018.
[250] Ibid.; UNICEF and UNFPA, *Child Marriage in South Asia: An evidence review.*
[251] Jejeebhoy, S.J., *Ending Child Marriage in India.*
[252] KII with Principal of High School, Sawai Madhopur, Rajasthan, India, 8 December 2022.

> "What happens in most of the cases... suppose a family has three daughters and an elder one is 18 years and other two are younger than her... the parents plan their marriage together with the elder sister. While doing so, they hide all the identity and proof of marriage... like they will only get the name of the elder sister printed on the marriage card... parents hide all proof to avoid any legal action."
>
> - Principal of High School, Rajasthan, India, 8 December 2022.

> "My parents are now free from their responsibility of my marriage. They were scared during COVID and were uncertain about my future. So they decided to marry me with my sister. 'One daughter is free with another one'... [laughing]."
>
> - A married adolescent, female, 18 years, Rajasthan, India, 5 December 2022.

4.2.3.4 Educational attainment of parents

The educational attainment of the parent or head of household has been demonstrated to have a strong inverse relationship with child marriage in Bangladesh, India and Nepal. A 2018 study in Bangladesh found the rate of child marriage among married women with uneducated mothers to be 2.7 times higher than among those whose mothers had higher secondary education or above (74 per cent versus 27 per cent)[253] and 1.8 times higher among married women with uneducated fathers (75 per cent) than those with fathers who had completed at least secondary education (41 per cent).[254] A 2017 situation assessment of child marriage in five districts in Nepal revealed a marked reduction in child marriage from 17 per cent where the household head has no formal education to six per cent where the head has been educated to secondary level or above.[255] The same pattern was observed in a 2022 quantitative survey in West Bengal, India.[256]

That parental education is a protective factor against child marriage is likely due to a combination of reasons, including more opportunities, improved economic status and the likelihood that educated parents will support their own children through education in turn. Furthermore, parental educational attainment is an important predictor of familial attitudes towards issues related to child marriage, such as the perceived value of girls and their role within society and marriage, which inevitably has an impact on prevalence.[257] In a study in Bangladesh, respondents from households headed by someone with higher levels of education were more likely to recognize the negative consequences of child marriage, be aware of the law prohibiting child marriage and hold the belief that girls should wait until they are 18 years old to marry.[258]

Data from the present study indicates that the educational attainment of parents persists as a determinant of child marriage, though it was less frequently mentioned by participants in comparison to other drivers, and there was no direct evidence that COVID-19 had impacted or changed the driver. However, respondents commonly mentioned the close interplay between poverty, the educational attainment of parents and likelihood of child marriage, such that it is possible that economic impact of COVID-19 on educational attainment may impact this driver in future.

4.2.3.5 Unsafe or unstable family environments

Previous evidence has indicated that children who grow up in unstable or violent homes and those who lack parental support and protection are more likely to get married at a younger age as a protection strategy and to seek security.[259] A global analysis by World Vision in 2021 noted that the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to have impacted this trend in light of the increasing stress on parents and the consequent reduction in their ability to provide support to their children.[260]

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[253] University of Dhaka, *Context of Child Marriage and Its Implications in Bangladesh,* xxv.
[254] Ibid.
[255] UNFPA and the Department of Population Studies, *Situation Assessment of Child Marriage in Selected Five Intervention Districts of Nepal.*
[256] Roy A. and Chouhan P, "Exploring the socioeconomic factors associated with girl child marriage and its impact on pregnancy outcomes: A study from Malda District of West Bengal", *Indian J Community,* Med 47:8–11, 2022.
[257] UNFPA and the Department of Population Studies, *Situation Assessment of Child Marriage in Selected Five Intervention Districts of Nepal.*
[258] "Child Marriage in Bangladesh: An exploration of preferences, beliefs and norms – Policy brief on ending child marriage", unpublished internal document, 2018.
[259] N. Mitra, S. Parasuraman, *Child Marriage & Early Motherhood: Understandings from lived experiences of young people,* Tata Institute of Social Sciences, pp. 32-33, 2015.
[260] World Vision, *COVID-19 and Child Marriage.*

Data from the present study demonstrate that unsafe and unstable family environments persist as a driver of child marriage in the research sites, though this factor appears less prominent than other determinants. Research participants mentioned parental divorce,[261] fractured family relationships, division and conflict in the household[262] and experiencing violence, abuse and neglect from parents and family members[263] as reasons that children seek marriage (usually self-initiated) as a strategy to ensure stability and protection.

> "**[What do you think are some of the reasons people end up getting married at a young age?]** Stress at home. If she is neglected by her father. **[Why does this lead to her getting married?]** If her father has another wife or stepmother, then she is not getting the love she needs. If she is not getting love and care from her own home, why would she stay in that situation? It's better to get married and have her own life."
>
> - FGD with adolescents, female, 15–16 years, Surkhet, Karnali, Nepal, 10 November 2022.

> "There is a problem of day-to-day life, daily expenses, and mother and father, they are always fighting, they are not caring for their children. And, obviously, if there is no love, a girl will use marriage as a form of escape, to escape that trouble."
>
> - President, Aawaaj (NGO), Kathmandu, Nepal, 17 December 2022.

Specifically in relation to COVID-19, participants highlighted that a combination of increasing financial stress on the family and prolonged periods of time spent together at home during lockdowns led to stress conflict and violence within certain homes, encouraging some children to seek marriage by way of elopement. A few considered that increased access to mobile phones compounded this dynamic by providing children with the means to communicate with each other and pursue marriage on their own terms *(see section 4.2.4.2)*.

> "Some of the girls might have got married because of the economic condition, or if their parents are fighting every day and they are getting abused. **[Do you think these types of environments have become more prevalent or worse during COVID?]** Yes. Before COVID, father and mother used to work and earn money, they didn't have a crisis. But during COVID both people were unable to work or earn money, there is economic crisis. Because of that, fighting increased. [**How does fighting lead to child marriage?]** When parents fight at home, the girl feels unloved and uncared for. If someone is polite to her, she feels that that person cares for her and she falls in love. That leads to marriage."
>
> - FGD with adolescents, female, 14–17 years, Surkhet, Karnali, Nepal, 10 December 2022.

The death or illness of a family member was cited in the data as a reason that children marry, although, no instances were reported of death/disease due to COVID-19. This is likely because COVID-19 affected the older generation more severely than people of reproductive age.[264] Participants reported that if the father of a household became unwell or had significant fears about death, he would endeavour to marry his daughter promptly to satisfy himself that he had relieved his parental obligations, and allay any fears about what might happen to her if he passed away.[265] This driver was closely linked to financial pressure, which was greatly exacerbated by COVID-19. If a household earner became unwell or died, there was a greater incentive to marry girls off to reduce pressure on the family.

[261] KII with Headteacher, Female, Surkhet, Karnali, Nepal, 14 November 2022; FGD with adolescents, female, 15-16 years, Surkhet, Karnali, Nepal, 10 November 2022; Individual interview married girl, 21 years, Surkhet, Karnali, Nepal, 8 December 2022.
[262] FGD with adolescents, male, 15–17 years, Cachar, Assam, India, 24 November 2022.
[263] FGD with adolescents, male, 15–17 years, Cachar, Assam, India, 22 November 2022; FGD with parents/caregivers, female, 31-40 years, Surkhet, Nepal, 11 December 2022; FGD with adolescents, female, 14–17 years, Surkhet, Karnali, Nepal, 10 November 2022;
[264] UNICEF, COVID-19: *A threat to progress against child marriage*.
[265] Individual interview with married adolescent, female, 16 years, Sylhet City, Sylhet, Bangladesh, 23 November 2022; FGD with parents/ caregivers, male, 30–37 years, Cachar, Assam, India, 24 November 2022.

> "The situation at my home was very bad. My father was too sick to take care of us and they wanted to get me married so I could go to my husband's house and have someone to provide for me."
>
> - A married adolescent, female, 18 years, Cachar, Assam, India, 21 November 2022.

4.2.3.6 Migration

Interesting dynamics have been identified in the literature on the relationship between migration and child marriage in South Asia generally, and in Bangladesh, India and Nepal in particular. Bangladesh and Nepal are sources of labour migration to India. Porous borders enable regular and circular migration, particularly of boys and men, who migrate for the purposes of seeking employment in India, usually as manual labour, but may end up travelling onwards to the Gulf states.[266] Older studies have shown that men who prolonged marriage until after returning home post-migration were more likely to select their own wife compared to those who married prior to migration.[267] Other studies have found that families pressure males to marry prior to migrating in an attempt to prevent pre-marital sexual behaviour.[268] This is influenced by family background: in Nepal, low-income Hindu families prefer to marry their sons prior to migration, whereas the preference is the opposite for low-income Muslim families.[269] Migration of any family member has an impact upon the likelihood of the siblings or children left behind marrying young – though again, the dynamics are not straightforward. In general, migration for employment brings wealth to the families by way of remittances. This means the families of girls can afford higher dowries and may be able to resist financial pressure to marry children at an earlier age.[270]

The data demonstrated that COVID-19 impacted migration patterns across the research locations, which in turn, had interesting associations with child marriage practices. A typical pre-COVID pattern in the research locations was for boys and men to migrate internally (usually to cities) or across the border (typically from Bangladesh and Nepal to India, and sometimes further afield, for example, to the Middle East), while families remained at home. Migration patterns were frequently reported to be seasonal and cyclical, with migrants spending most of the year abroad or in cities working and sending remittances, and then returning home for several months.

The closure of borders and places of employment saw many workers return to their home communities. Participants who were living in or had returned from cities to villages during COVID-19 appear to have been able to buffer themselves somewhat from the economic impacts of the pandemic due to lower living costs in villages, along with less reliance on external economies and food self- sufficiency through access to agricultural lands.

> "During lockdown, we could not make money or earn. So, we went back to our original home... During COVID I stayed in this rural area. Our livelihood was dependent on local tasks. I saw that people in the villages were growing things on their own... they were not dependent on outer communities to survive... In comparison to city life, the village was less affected by COVID because in the city area everyone was dependent on outer resources. We had to go to work and earn money and buy things. We had nothing then, but we still had to buy. But in the village, the villages were more self-sufficient. They could grow their own food by themselves, they were less dependent on shops."
>
> - A married youth, male, 21 years, Surkhet, Karnali, Nepal, 12 December 2022.

Nonetheless, limited ability to undertake labour-related migration resulted in many families losing their main or even only income stream.

In Sheikhpura (Bihar, India), many research participants were from low-income families. Men from these families

[266] Boender, Carol, "The Relationship between Child Labour and Child Marriage", p 36.
[267] Naved, Newby and Amin, 2001, cited in UNICEF and UNFPA, *Key Drivers of the Changing Prevalence of Child Marriage in Three Countries in South Asia,* p 13.
[268] Ibid.
[269] Ibid.
[270] UNICEF and UNFPA, *Key Drivers of the Changing Prevalence of Child Marriage,* p 14.


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typically migrated for 6–7 months at a time, while their families remained at home. The reverse migration brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic caused considerable financial stress and placed an extra burden on women.

> "COVID led to many difficulties in our area. The majority of the residents here are migrants and they go to Delhi, Punjab, Haryana to work as labourers. In lockdown, they lost their work and had to return in the community. At that time, it was very difficult to sustain themselves as there was no income. Food availability was somehow managed as people survived through farms. But for other needs of the family, such as education of children and medication, many more suffered very badly at that time."
>
> - Development Officer, Vikas Mitra (NGO), Bihar, India, 14 November 2022.

> "Those who were migrant labourers in big cities came back to their homes during the first wave of COVID lockdown in March 2020 in the hope that it would pass soon... People faced a lot of trouble financially. People were losing jobs and no one wanted to hire more daily wage workers. Lockdowns and restrictions were frightening and frustrating especially for those who had no source of income."
>
> - Project Coordinator, Government Health Centre, Cachar, Assam, India, 14 November, 2022.

In this way, changes in migration processes and patterns compounded the significance of family poverty as a driver of child marriage *(see section 4.2.3.1)*.

The significant impacts of COVID-19 on migration patterns are associated with child marriage in several more direct ways. According to some research participants, migration had been a protective factor against child marriage prior to COVID-19, with families tending to delay marriages until boys/men returned home. In Chapainawabganj (Rajshahi, Bangladesh), it was indicated that the higher economic status and security achieved by some men following a period of working abroad meant that they demanded less dowry, which in turn reduced the demand for younger brides.

Across the different research locations, a dominant theme in the data was that COVID had caused many individuals – typically young men – to return to their home communities, resulting in a sudden influx of eligible grooms even as families lost an important income stream as remittances dried up. The interplay between changes in migration patterns, loss of secure livelihoods and limited access to educational and other opportunities for girls in home communities appears to have driven child marriage in the research locations. Participants made frequent references to returning migrants who had saved up while working away from home and, due to the disruptions caused by COVID-19, were suddenly required to move back to wait out the pandemic. This was considered an appropriate time by these migrants (and/or their families) to marry.

> "The boys, once they return back from India, they feel that 'I am an earning man' and immediately identify a girl and they have attractions, and girls also, they have many problems."
>
> - President, Aawaaj (NGO), Kathmandu, Nepal, 17 December 2022.

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> "During COVID, a lot of young men who migrated to different parts of the world, they came back, because of lockdowns... the marriage rates increased because of that influx of men coming... In our culture, marriages, you know, it's a key life achievement. It's almost like a must, there's almost like a compulsion around that narrative. The other thing is also the fact that, many parents, they believe that, especially if you are sending your boys out to work, they feel that that's the way to keep some connection. So having a family like a wife and a child would have that connection... So the parents also feel that if he gets married, he will have somebody back home so that he comes back again."
>
> - Representatives of UNICEF and UNFPA, South Asia, Kathmandu, Nepal, 17 December 2022.

Young men who had been working abroad or in the city were considered desirable grooms, given their real or perceived higher economic status.

> "The COVID pandemic added some extra tension to the fathers of school-going daughters who were currently confined at home. Many boys who had also been working in urban areas or from abroad and returned to their village are the 'ideal' bridegroom for many families."
>
> - A parent/caregiver of married child, male, 50 years, Chapainawabganj, Rajshahi, Bangladesh, 22 November 2022.

According to an illustrative account of an adolescent girl who was married at 14 years of age during COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020, the change in migration patterns brought about by the pandemic was a clear driver of her marriage.

"I married at the age of 14, and my husband was 25. My husband had been working as a construction worker in Dubai and had returned. As soon as he returned from abroad, his family arranged a marriage with me. I was young – a student in ninth grade. I was considered attractive, so my family began to receive marriage proposals from different places. My family thought my husband was a good match as he had just returned from Dubai and had given gold jewellery to their daughter!"

- Married adolescent, female, 16 years, Chapainawabganj, Rajshahi, Bangladesh, 22 November 2022.

Conversely, though less commonly, it appears that COVID-19 restrictions may have functioned as a protective factor against child marriage where young migrant men who intended to marry a girl in their home communities were stuck overseas due to border closures, however, this finding emerged only from Nepal and, typically, in the context of self-initiated marriages.

"If there was no COVID pandemic, I would have married much earlier when I was 15/16 years old. Due to COVID, my marriage was delayed – my husband was in Bombay [Mumbai] during the lockdowns."

- A married adolescent, female, 18 years, Dhanusha, Madhesh, Nepal, 11 December 2022.

COVID-19 also appears to have been a driver of migration in cases where income-earners were driven to migrate – with or without their families – in search of new livelihoods. In the research locations in Bihar, India, for example, the lack of access to income opportunities at home, and the acute shortage of labourers in other states, drove people to leave home even during lockdowns. In these cases, middlemen and employers arranged private transport (in contravention of lockdown restrictions), including for children under the age of 18. In some cases, it appears to have been considered important to ensure that children were married prior to migration.

"After COVID, many dropped out of school. Children who were in private schools were badly affected as private schools never reopened again after COVID in our area. The parents took their children also with them to work in other cities."

- FGD with adolescents, female, 12-16 years, Sheikhpura, Bihar, India, 14 November 2022.

"After COVID many children went to cities for work with their parents... mainly, boys and girls are married by their parents before going...."

- FGD with adolescents, female, 14-20 years, Sheikhpura, Bihar, India, 16 November 2022.

4.2.3.7 Conclusion

Economic insecurity triggered by COVID-19 exacerbated poverty and financial stress at the family level and created a greater sense of urgency to marry off daughters to alleviate household outgoings. In other cases, girls themselves opted to pursue marriage as a strategy to resolve their or their family's financial situation especially when COVID-19 impacted the family breadwinner's ability to work. The more children in the household, the greater the risk that girls in the family would be married off. COVID-19-induced financial stress at the family level and prolonged periods of time spent together at home during lockdowns led to friction, stress, conflict and violence within some homes, which encouraged some children to seek marriage by way of elopement.

In terms of migration, the return of many men to their home communities during COVID-19 resulted in a sudden influx of desirable grooms even as families lost an important income stream from remittances. This appears to have been a key driver of child marriage in the research locations.

Lack of educational attainment of parents and family death/illness endure as drivers of marriage in the research locations, though there is no evidence to suggest these had been impacted by COVID-19.

4.2.4 Individual drivers

4.2.4.1 Access to phones and social media

The literature review found contradictory evidence on the influence of media access on child marriage. Some authors suggested that increased access to media provides knowledge and information about the consequences of marriage, which may encourage them to delay marriage until children reach adulthood.[271]This is, however, thrown into question by the fact that media access is high in South Asian countries and yet child marriage persists, indicating that other structural, community and family drivers are dominant.[272] In a 2018 study in Bangladesh, quantitative data indicated that child and parental exposure to media reduced the likelihood of child marriage, but the qualitative responses indicated otherwise. Respondents believed exposure to social media and television was increasing romantic feelings among children which encouraged them to marry earlier than they would have done otherwise.[273] Some considered the use of mobile phones and social media might lead to an increase in self-initiated marriages rather than traditional marriages arranged by parents, as it "provides a tool for girls and boys to communicate (secretly) and to intermingle."[274] In Nepal, adults and children acknowledged that increased use of mobile phones, social media and internet access increased self-initiated marriages and elopements by adolescents, owing to the larger pool of potential partners they are able to access.[275] Authors of previous studies have expressed caution about these unions as the evidence suggests that some adolescents made marriage commitments before meeting in person, which could expose them to exploitation and abuse.[276] Research in other countries (Philippines and Zimbabwe) found that the increased use of mobile phones during COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions was a driver of child marriage as children and adolescents were able to communicate freely without parental oversight.[277]

In general, mobile phone and internet use appears to have increased in the research locations during the COVID-19 lockdowns. The participatory exercises conducted during FGDs demonstrated that, prior to COVID-19, children had very limited access to the internet and smartphones and that access increased during COVID-19. Participants tended to link this to the increased rate of self-initiated marriages. Even in economically disadvantaged families, it was generally seen as essential for children to have access to the internet to continue their education during school closures. Parents tended to buy phones for their children, when possible. In other cases, children successfully negotiated access to their parent's (typically their father's) mobile phone for remote learning. In some cases, schools provided SIM cards for students. The only exception to this was in Sheikhpura (Bihar, India), where research participants tended to report that access to mobile phones and the internet had not increased during the COVID-19 lockdowns, and this was therefore not perceived as a driver of child marriage in this location.

A dominant theme in the data across the other research locations is that the increased access to phones and online communication (in particular, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat and online gaming) was a key driver of child marriage during COVID-19, particularly of self-initiated marriages. According to research participants, the main reasons for this were that adolescents were at home, isolated from peers, bored, disengaged from online schooling and were developing ways to stay socially connected. In the process, they may have developed romantic connections with peers and, at times, to persons they had not met in person.

> "Children were at home all day. They could not go to school or to meet their friends. They were really bored and frustrated at home all day. My children would just spend the whole day on their mobile phones. I scolded them a lot for this but what else could they have done all day at home? During lockdowns I did not let my children go anywhere because we were scared that they might get COVID and fall sick. We are all being very cautious. But how long can you keep a child at home? Children have their own mind and need to go out and do things."
>
> - FGD with parents/caregivers, male, 30–37 years, Cachar, Assam, India, 24 November 2022.

[271] Ibid.
[272] Ibid.
[273] University of Dhaka, *Context of Child Marriage and its Implications in Bangladesh,* p. 114.
[274] Sharma, J., et al., *Early and Child Marriage in India: A landscape analysis,* Nirantar Trust, 2015, quoted in: UNICEF and UNFPA, *Key Drivers of the Changing Prevalence of Child Marriage,* para 60.
[275] UNICEF and UNFPA, *Child Marriage in Humanitarian Settings in South Asia, p. 10. See also Aawaaj, Situation Analysis of Child Marriage in Karnali Province,* Nepal, March 2022.
[276] UNICEF and UNFPA, *Child Marriage in Humanitarian Settings in South Asia.*
[277] CRANK, *Evidence Review,* p.27.

"My school was also closed during COVID. Because of this, I gradually lost interest in studies... I was feeling trapped in the house... All the household chores and responsibilities were also on me during COVID because my mother was weak at that time. At that time when I used to feel sad and lonely, I used to talk to my [future] husband from my father's phone... we know each other because we met before at some wedding, but we fell in love and started talking during lockdown."

- A married youth, female, 20 years, Udaipur, Rajasthan, India, 14 January 2023.

"We had freedom. This meant we could spend more time on social media, like Facebook and Tik Tok. That's how people met people. They would be bored and talk and get married... If there was no lockdown during COVID, I might not have talked to him [future husband] as much in my free time. There was nothing else to do during lockdown, other than talking to him."

- A married youth, female, 20 years, Udaipur, Rajasthan, India, 14 January 2023.

Limited supervision by parents (whether due to lack of knowledge of online communication platforms or lack of time) was also mentioned by participants as driving the use of communication technologies to connect to romantic partners. A key informant said: "The main reasons for child marriage is lack of awareness and access to mobile [phones]. Uneducated parents give mobiles to their children, but they do not monitor how they are using mobiles." [278]

Parents and caregivers tended to describe the use of phones and the internet for these purposes as "misuse", "addiction" or as children being "exposed" to bad influences, particularly girls. Parents tended to be quite reluctant to give their children access to mobile phones, but felt it was necessary to ensure they could access education online. Concerns expressed by parents (and some key informants) around mobile phone use was often exclusively directed at girls. These appear to be connected to the social restrictions placed on girls and the responsibility on parents to police adolescent girls' sexuality *(see section 4.2.1.2).*

"Especially during the COVID lockdown period, girls remained at home and became addicted to their mobile phones, which may have seduced them or instigated them into having a romantic relationship or eloping. It placed an extra load on parents during this time."

- FGD with parents/caregivers, female, 28–55 years, Gaibandha, Rangpur, Bangladesh, 23 November 2022.

"It is extremely common for young girls to run away with young boys in our neighbourhood. They just get married and leave. It has brought shame to a lot of families. I always worried a lot for my daughter. COVID-19 has definitely increased this because, for education, many parents are buying mobile phones for their children. The children misuse it in many ways."

- A parent/caregiver of married child, female, 44 years, Cachar, Assam, India, 25 November 2022.

[278] KII with KIRDAP NGO, Kalikot, Karnali, Nepal (virtual), 28 January 2023.

Conversely, adolescents tended to describe the use of the internet and mobile phones positively, as a way to avoid isolation and connect with peers. Some, particularly girls, described this as empowering and as enabling them to exercise greater agency in decision-making relating to marriage.

> "We use more social media now and during COVID than we did before COVID. Most of the things happen on the mobile phone now. We used the phones to do our classes, chat with friends, and upload pictures. Marriage has increased because of this as more people meet and talk on social media."
>
> - FGD with adolescents, female, 17–18 years, Hailakandi, Assam, India, 15 November 2022.

> "Now, lots of people marry out of their own choice. It's now more than before COVID... During COVID, more people were engaged with mobile phones. Using that mobile phone was a starting point, because we were not in school."
>
> - A married adolescent, male, 18 years, Sylhet City, Sylhet, Bangladesh

> "Parents make the decision when a girl and boy should get married. Even for boys, parents make the decision. In a lot of cases, the boys decide on their own, but a girl can never make this decision. But maybe it is easier for young people to decide to marry for themselves now as there are more opportunities to elope. Mobile phones and the internet have made things easier."
>
> - FGD with adolescents, female, 14–16 years, Cachar, Assam, India, 23 November 2022.

It appears that, while boys had greater access to mobile phones than girls prior to COVID-19, the need to access online schooling as a result of COVID-19-related school closures equalized, to a degree, access to the internet, as girls (whose movements and interactions are typically subject to greater scrutiny and regulation by parents) were legitimately able to gain access to mobile phones. This appears to have opened increased opportunities for girls to socialize (virtually), suggesting that increased access to mobile phones and the internet had a more profound impact on girls and their ability to exercise agency in decision-making relating to marriage than it did boys, though, of course, it is likely that this agency remained quite restricted, given the dominant social and cultural norms that regulate the sexuality of girls and stigmatize self-initiated marriages in some contexts.

There was some indication in the data that increased access to the internet and mobile phones may at times have driven arranged marriages as a pre-emptive measure by parents to ensure that children (particularly girls) did not fall in love and enter a relationship and/or elope, which was typically expressed as something that would bring shame on the family (especially in research locations in India and Bangladesh).

> "During lockdowns when children were confined at home, they became busy with mobile phones. They misused the phones engaging much in social media and making friends. Some of them engaged in romantic relationships with boys and started meeting in the evening nearby their homes. The parents found some of them and became suspicious of their daughters. So they married their daughters hurriedly at a young age."
>
> - FGD with parents/caregivers, male, no ages provided, Rautahat, Madhesh, Nepal, 5 December 2022.

> "Girls stay at home and do nothing. They become addicted to mobile [phones] and elope, bringing dishonour to their family. So, early marriage is perhaps a way of relief for the parents."
>
> - FGD with adolescents, female, 13–15 years, Gaibandha, Rangpur, Bangladesh, 24 November 2022.

4.2.4.2 Agency

There is longstanding evidence that girls who marry before the age of 18 often have little say in decision-making processes relating to their marriage, and are less likely to be consulted about when to marry or the choice of husband. They are less likely to have met their husbands before marriage, compared to women who marry at an older age.[279] For example, in a survey of children in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, India, 45 per cent of girls who married under the age of 18 were found to had no say in choosing their husband.[280] Limits on girls' ability to exercise their agency is commonly the narrative among those who have been married. For example, one study in Bangladesh and Nepal found that when girls try to assert their choices in relation to marriage they are often stigmatized by their families and communities and seen as standing against the authority of their fathers and brothers.[281]

While agency has been linked to lower child marriage rates overall, adolescent agency has been reported to encourage self-initiated marriages and elopements in some contexts. In a study in Nepal in 2020, adolescent agency was found to be "the most notable driver of child marriage identified for both boys and girls". The author suggested the rise in elopements in the wake of the earthquake was fuelled by a desire among adolescents to seek stable and certain future,[282] but pointed out that agency is, "inextricably linked to other drivers"[283] including education and participation in the labour market.[284]

According to research participants in Bangladesh and India, children – particularly girls – had very limited agency in decisions relating to marriage pre-COVID. Data indicates that, despite the reported increase in self-initiated marriages driven by increased access to romantic partners through phones and social media, COVID-19 had a limited impact on agency as a driver of child marriage. Arranged marriages, in which parents find or at least are required to approve of a child's spouse, are dominant and self-initiated marriages continue to be stigmatized and can expose girls to ostracism and even violence *(see section 4.1)*.

[279] Santhya, K.G., et al., "Associations between early marriage and young women's marital and reproductive health outcomes: Evidence from India", *International Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health*, 36(3): pp. 132–139, 2010.
[280] Crivello, G., et al, *Marital and Fertility Decision-making: The lived experiences of adolescents and young married couples in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, India.* Research Report, Young Lives, Oxford, 2018.
[281] CARE, *Cultural Context of Child Marriage in Nepal and Bangladesh: Findings from CARE's Tipping Point Project Community Participatory Analysis,* 2016
[282] UNICEF and UNFPA, *Child Marriage in Humanitarian Settings in South Asia,* p. 10.
[283] UNICEF and UNFPA, *Child Marriage in South Asia,* p 23.
[284] Ibid.

It was, however, reported that self-initiated (child) marriages in locations in Bangladesh and India had increased during COVID-19, indicating that the increased ability for children – and girls in particular – to make decisions about marriage may have been a driver of child marriage. This, however, must be examined within a broader context in which decision-making by children (girls in particular) in relation to marriage is highly constrained. For instance, some participants reported examples of girls who had hurried into a self-initiated child marriage before her parents were able to arrange a marriage for her.

> **"[What are the common reasons for why young people get married?]** Having a relationship. **[Why does them having a relationship mean they get married, why not wait a few years?]** Because they're afraid that the family will give them into marriage if they were older and had to wait."
>
> - FGD with adolescents, male, 14–17 years, Bagerhat, Khulna, Bangladesh, 30 November 2022.

This indicates that the ability for children to exercise agency in a meaningful way may not have been a driving force for child marriage in these locations. It may be, instead, that limits on children's agency during COVID-19 (and at other times) can be seen to have driven increases in child marriage, even in the case of self-initiated marriages.

Conversely, in several research locations in India (Udaipur, Rajasthan and Purnea, Bihar), participants reported that some boys were required to work to supplement the family income during COVID-19. This appears to have given them increased independence and the ability to be involved in decision-making relating to marriage. It emerged from participants, particularly during participatory discussions, that this increased independence was a driver of self-initiated marriages for boys.

> "Many started earning after COVID so now the person who earns has also the right to take decisions for the family."
>
> - FGD with adolescents, male, 13–19 years, Purnea, Bihar, India, 23 November 2022.

In the locations in Nepal, it appears that some boys and girls exercised greater agency in marriage-related decision-making prior to COVID-19, with participants tending to report that children themselves decide whether they want to get married (though this exercise of agency is, of course, constrained by dominant norms, beliefs and practices within their communities, including the stigmatization of romantic relationships between non-married adolescents). However, it appears to be important for parents to agree to the marriage, which may not always be given. Participants reported that this was not associated with the changes brought about by COVID-19 but, rather, was connected to a general "modernization" in communities or that this is the way it has been "for a long time".

> "Nowadays, parents allow the boys and girls to see each other face-to-face before marriage. Decision-making by children of their marriage is also on the rise gradually... They don't force their children to marry against their will. COVID-19 has not made it either easy or difficult for young people to decide to marry for themselves."
>
> - FGD with parents/caregivers, female, ages not provided, Rautahat, Madhesh, Nepal, 3 December 2022.

4.2.4.3 Conclusion

COVID-19 appears to have had a considerable impact on the drivers of child marriage at the individual level. Increased access to communication technology and mobile phones also appears to have driven changes in child marriage practices. While a dominant narrative was that access to communication technology increased instances of self-initiated marriages, as it gave children (girls in particular) new ways to expand their social networks and negotiate marriage on their own terms, it can also be seen to have driven arranged marriages as a pre-emptive measure by parents out of concern that girls will transgress social expectations. While it appears that girls' agency in marriage decisions increased during COVID-19 through an increased ability to socialize (virtually), this must be viewed within a broader context in which decision-making by children (girls in particular) in relation to marriage is highly constrained.

4.3 Impacts of COVID-19 on dynamics within child marriages

The present study also sought to understand how COVID-19 has impacted experiences for girls and boys within marriage. While there is limited evidence of the impacts of COVID-19 on dynamics within marriage, available data indicate that COVID-19 drove an increase of family violence in the region. Data from Nepal has indicated a rise in incidents of intimate partner violence, including domestic violence, marital rape, and other forms of abuse: from 2021 to 2022 there were 3,510 female victims of sexual violence (including 1,386 girls between the ages of 11 and 16 years) and 36 male victims.[285] An evaluation by the Population Council found that because more people were at home as a result of the pandemic, there was also an increased demand for domestic and caretaking labour within households.[286] This demand was met largely by girls and women.[287]

Several key themes arose in this study, including girls' experiences of violence within child marriage, difficult relationships with in-laws and other family members, inadequate access to SRH and other support services, traditional gender roles (including decision-making on income generation, childrearing responsibilities and division of household labour), and experiences and attitudes towards the separation of couples married as children.

The powerlessness of girls within marriage as a result of underlying structural gender inequalities and social expectations relating to gender roles appears to have been exacerbated by the stresses caused by COVID-19, placing girls at greater risk of violence and abuse.

4.3.1 Relationships with family and friends

It was not uncommon for married children and parents of married children to report being unable to see each other during COVID-19 due to lockdown restrictions. Young people reported feeling more isolated from family and friends. Many were unable to maintain frequent contact with their family, particularly those who had moved far from home to live with their in-laws upon marriage. Some girls highlighted the difficulty they faced adjusting to married life during COVID-19 when they were unable to see their family. In some instances, controlling or abusive behaviour from in-laws and husbands relating to the restriction of contact between girls and their families was prevalent during COVID-19; lockdown restrictions exacerbated what was often an already isolating experience for girls. Some girls reported that the isolation during COVID-19 fuelled violence from their family and friends.

> "My relationship with my husband is good. Sometimes when I make a mistake, he gets angry but does not hit me or scold me. My father-in-law sometimes gets angry at me and abuses my parents if I cannot do my work in the house properly. I don't talk to anyone about problems in my marriage as it is our personal issue. During COVID-19 my husband was very worried about money and food. He was very depressed during this time. Sometimes he would take out his anger on me. If we had sex and I did not get pregnant, he would be very aggressive the next time we had sex. He would force me to have more sex so we could have children quickly. I cannot say no to him because he is my husband and I also want children. I really hope I can have a child soon. It is not normal for women to be married for such a long time and not have children. Things have become better now that he is back to work. He has become calmer and treats me well."
>
> - A married adolescent, female, 19 years, Cachar, Assam, India, 23 November 2022.

> "I regret my decision but I had no choice. We made a mistake choosing the family for her. During COVID I could not see her so I was more worried. I tried to call her often but most of the time she could not pick up. I gave her a phone so she could call me but they took it away."
>
> - A parent/caregiver of married child, female, 44 years, Cachar, Assam, India, 25 November 2022.

[285] Nepal Police Headquarters, Women, Children and Senior Citizens Service Directorate, *Annual Fact Sheet on Gender-Based Violence July/Aug 2021 to Jun/July 2022*
[286] Melnikas A.J., Saul G., Chau M., Pandey N., Mkandawire J., Gueye M., Diarra A, and Amin S., *More Than Brides Alliance: Endline Evaluation Report 2016-2020*, New York Population Council, 2021.
[287] Makino M., Shonchoy A.S., and Wahhaj. Z., 'Early effects of the COVID-19 lockdown on children in rural Bangladesh', Discussion Paper, University of Kent School of Economics, January 2021.

> "During COVID it was not possible to go out and meet people, so I was all alone in that house and there was no female in my in-law's house. It was very difficult to survive. I often thought of returning to my parents' house, but I was helpless. I was in debt to my husband... he gave one lakh (US$ 1,200) to my father that helped my family in during COVID."
>
> - A married adolescent, female, 18 years, Purnea, Bihar, India, 20 November 2022.

However, the social isolation girls experienced was often perceived as being due to marriage generally, rather than COVID-19 per se. Even, at the time of interview, after lockdown restrictions had been lifted, many girls reported that they were too busy performing their wifely duties to visit family members, or that their husbands or in-laws did not allow them to see their family.[288]

Not all married girls experienced social isolation from family as a result of COVID-19; it was common for girls who lived close to their families, particularly in rural areas, to report that COVID-19 had no impact on their interactions with family. In rural areas, restrictions were not as closely monitored or adhered to, meaning girls were able to continue seeing family and friends.[289]

Finally, it was common for girls and parents to report a breakdown of relationships between children and their families in response to children self-initiating their marriage during COVID-19.

> "When I ran away, my mother called and asked where I was and why I did this. She asked if my husband is forcing me to run away. My father doesn't speak to me anymore, but I speak with my mother now."
>
> - A married adolescent, female, 18 years, Surkhet, Karnali, Nepal, 8 December 2022.

4.3.2 Experiences of violence in child marriage

A pervasive theme in this study was that COVID-19 has led to an increase in girls' experiences of violence within marriage. There were several reasons for the reported increase in violence during COVID-19, including anger from parents and in-laws regarding self-initiated marriages (which were consistently reported as becoming more prevalent during COVID-19), a failure of parents to pay dowry to in-laws, an increase in time spent within the home during lockdowns and increased financial difficulties. Additionally, some experiences of abuse were linked to gender roles and expectations of girls within marriage, which remain entrenched.

A common narrative across research locations was that men would beat girls for not behaving according to their demands or expectations. Although many girls reported a positive relationship with their husbands, they often reported having to obey their husbands or fathers-in-law to avoid physical abuse, while men highlighted their belief that women should be beaten for bad behaviour. Girls and parents provided many examples of when girls had been physically and/or emotionally abused within marriage by husbands and in-laws.

Many respondents believed the abuse of married girls in the home to be justified, particularly from the perspective of men. It was often noted that men's anger was in response to something girls or young women had done "wrong", such as talking back to the husband or trying to tell the husband what to do.

> "Yes, domestic violence did happen more during COVID-19, and it's common because women were hungry and said something, and the men couldn't tolerate it, so hurt her. It increased further after COVID-19 because we are still struggling to manage finances. Also, conflict [between couples] increased because of money; they're both interrelated."
>
> - FGD with parents/caregivers, male,24–62 years, Bagerhat, Khulna, Bangladesh, 30 November 2022.

[288] For example: Individual interview with married adolescent, female, 17 years, Nabarangpur, India, January 2023.
[289] Individual interview with married adolescent, female, 19 years, Cachar, Assam, India, 21 November 2022; FGD with adolescents, male, 12–17 years, Udaipur, Rajasthan, India, 13 January 2023.

"If she is being beaten for no reason, then it's a bad thing. But there might be a reason why her husband is beating her. **[What reasons?]** Like, for example, if she had bad behaviour towards him… Yes, if she talks back to him or tries to tell her husband what to do, then he would beat her. **[And what if she's being beaten for no reason?]** Maybe she could tell her parents. Getting the complaint, parents would ask other people who would be a itness in the community, to make sure she is telling the truth. If she is lying, we would take action. **[What action?]** We would beat her for lying… Parents would ask if there was a reason for her to get the beating. If parents found out that there is no reason for the beating, they would complain and tell the boy's parents to sort the situation … Yes, but if it is the girl's fault, the father would take action against her."

- FGD with parents/caregivers, male, 29-90 years Sylhet City, Sylhet, Bangladesh, 21 November 2022.

Abuse from in-laws during COVID-19 took various forms, including shouting, withholding food, beating, scolding, burning, forcing girls to stay in the home, isolating girls from their family, being emotionally and physically abusive to girls' families and even prohibiting girls from carrying out traditional gender roles within the home. Some of the reasons for abuse in the home are related to the same issues as drivers of child marriage, including wealth, dowry and caste or religious differences between couples.

During COVID-19, tensions were high in the home, which may have been a trigger for men becoming angry and violent. Many indicated that this abuse continued after the lockdown, because the stresses created by COVID-19 (particularly financial hardship) remained. The increased stress men faced when losing their job during COVID-19 was reported to be a trigger of violence towards their wives, sometimes in anger stemming from the belief that the girl was a financial burden, or in retaliation to the girls' family members being unable to provide financial support to the couple.

"My husband is not good. He beats me a lot; without any reason he is rude to me… He also abuses me and my family members… Because of COVID, he lost his job so he started abusing me to ask for money from my uncle so that I can give it to him, but my uncle is already doing so much for me and my mother. How can I ask for more from my uncle? He [the husband] gets angry with me saying that I am of no use to him. I can't even talk to anyone regarding my situation. In my marriage, decisions are always taken by my husband only. If I ever disagree with his decision or oppose him, he threatens me and beats me. He says that it is my duty to listen to him."

- A married youth, female, 21 years, Udaipur, Rajasthan, India, 11 January 2023.

"Economically, my in-laws are richer and more powerful. From the beginning, they abused my dad. I come from a poor family background…They [her parents] said that we were too poor to give dowry, money or anything else. I came from the village area, they come from the town area. My in-laws knew they were more powerful, and they didn't understand the love their son had for me, they were horrible to my parents because they were poor**. [In the end was any dowry or gifts exchanged?]** I had a lot of pressure at home… From the first day, they started abusing me by asking what I had brought with me from my home…

… They said 'You are coming here and sitting, while my son works. You are just enjoying his property.' When I was pregnant, I wanted something special for my baby. I wanted to eat, but there was no one to give me food. In our culture, house-cleaning tasks need to be done by the daughter-in-law. My mother-in-law used to get up earlier in the morning and do all the tasks, which was her way of symbolically saying that she doesn't want me to be here and that I am not needed in the house."

- A married adolescent, female, 19 years, Surkhet, Karnali, Nepal, 7 December 2022.

[296] FGD with parents/caregivers, male, 29-90 years Sylhet City, Sylhet, Bangladesh, 21 November 2022.

There were also reports of increases in marital rape, and examples where young women married as children reported sexual violence from their husband. This appears to be associated with underlying gendered power dynamics, rigid social norms relating to gender roles and male exertion of control over girls and women.

> "Yes, my husband was good with me initially but after a year he was very rude as I was not able to conceive a child... When in lockdown, I used to talk to my mother for one hour as I used to miss them so much... he would doubt me and think that I am talking to some boy and he used to beat me. One day he tied me to the bed and tried to slit my throat. He said he would kill me as I am not giving him a child and I am also talking to another man... he was in so much rage that I believe he would have killed me that day. After that, I escaped from there somehow and returned to my parents' house. After two months I returned to him, and I was shocked to see that he married another woman who was staying with him. I was heartbroken. I stayed there for some days but his second wife also tried to kill me."
>
> - A married youth, female, 21 years, Sheikhpura, Bihar, India, 16 November 2022.

Young couples being stuck in the house and forced to spend more time together was also an explanation for increased violence towards girls.[290] Multiple examples were given of abusive husbands who were alcoholics or drug users and the increased difficulties during COVID-19 triggered them to commit abuse, especially when coupled with job losses during COVID-19.

> "Gender-based violence is an issue because of drug use and alcoholism. **[Has drug use and alcoholism among young men increased?]** Yes, to the maximum. People were free during COVID and would brew local wine and then they will drink. This led to more domestic violence and rape, as well as robberies, during COVID."
>
> - Representative, Feminist Dalit Organization, Surkhet, Karnali, Nepal.

It was a common belief that those who enter into a self-initiated marriage are particularly vulnerable to abuse from in-laws, with reports that the girl will not be fully accepted into the marital home or within their new community. Parents often reported that they were not accepting of such marriages by their children and they did not like the additional responsibility it placed on them. Children often stated their in-laws were unkind or abusive towards them in the home. Perceptions from girls, boys and parents indicated the belief that girls who elope cannot seek support in the face of abuse, because they chose their own path. For example, one Muslim girl who eloped to marry her husband (in an unregistered, small ceremony with only her in-laws and a cleric present), subsequently experienced abuse from her husband and her in-laws, but felt that she could not tell her parents.

> "My husband used to kick me, push me down the bed and beat me. My in-laws used to say horrible things about me and my family in front of me. They did not stop my husband from beating me. I did not share this with my family as I eloped, so it is my fault that this is happening to me."
>
> - A married adolescent, female, 18 years, Hailakandi, Assam, India, 18 November 2022.

However, experiences of violence from in-laws were not limited to self-initiated marriages, but were also found within arranged marriages. One of the key explanations for the abuse of girls by their in-laws was related to dowry dynamics, including during COVID-19. It was common for respondents across locations (despite many saying that dowry practices no longer occurred due to its illegality) to report that in-laws would abuse their daughters-in-law if her parents were unable to pay the required dowry. Additionally, after marriage, in-laws increased dowry demands, essentially treating girls badly as a form of blackmail until her parents paid more. Dowry violence was reported to have increased during COVID-19 due to the increased financial hardship families were experiencing. When in-laws struggled, they would be violent towards girls and demand more dowry, and this violence would continue because parents also experiencing financial hardship during COVID-19 and were unable to meet these demands.[291]

[297] KII with District Coordinator, Indo-Global Social Services Society, Cachar, Assam, India, 25 November 2022.
[298] FGD with parents/caregivers, female, 26-65 years, Sylhet City, Sylhet, Bangladesh, 22 November 2022.

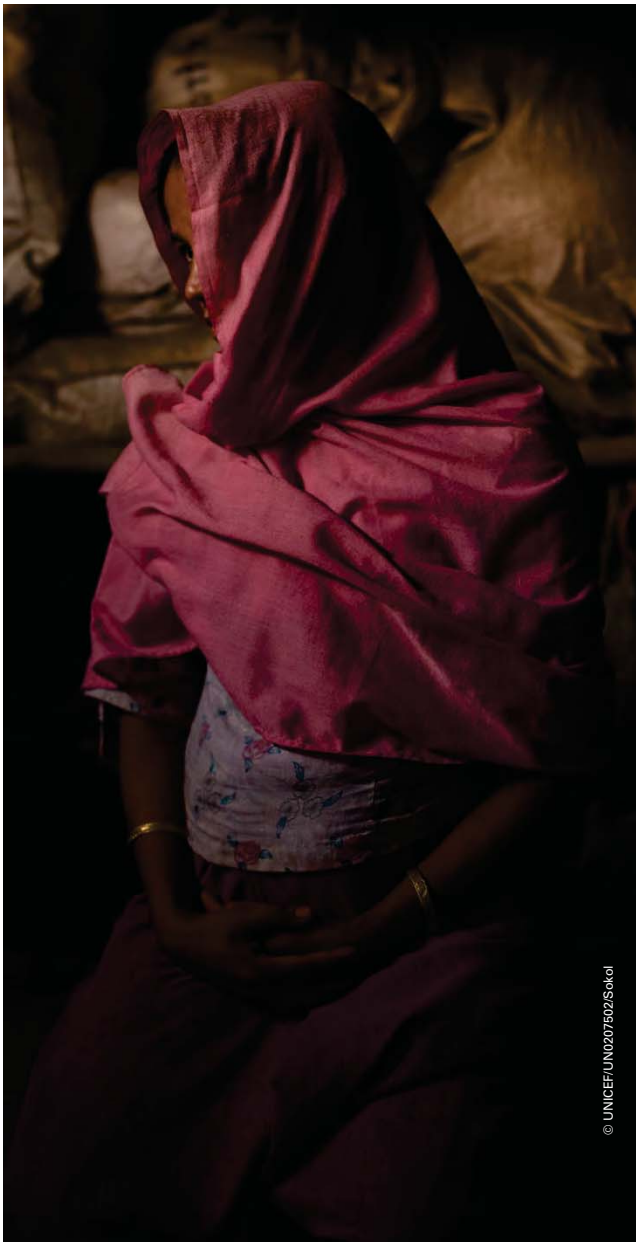
"My mother-in-law does not have a good relationship with me. She always wants me to serve her by massaging her legs on her return from work. If I refuse, she shows anger and abusive words towards me."

- A married adolescent, female, 17 years, Sheikhpura, Bihar, India, 14 November 2022.

"When I see her call, I get really scared. This one time, her mother-in-law put fuel on her head and beat her up. She does not want to go to police in case they abuse her more. I regret sending her to this evil family. Before marriage they seemed really nice, but I am not sure what changed. My daughter is so weak she cannot feed her child sometimes. Her husband puts out cigarettes on her body. I don't know what will happen to her."

- A parent/caregiver of married child, female, 44 years, Cachar, Assam, India, 25 November 2022.

A lack of access to support for married girls experiencing domestic violence was a clear theme; this was indicated by the girls themselves and their parents. When provided with scenarios and asked what girls could do when experiencing violence in marriage, there was limited knowledge of support available for victims of violence within communities. The main support for victims of violence is the police, but the general perception was that police would not help. Some indicated that help from NGOs was available, although there seem to be barriers to girls accessing this support.



"Whenever they abuse her in the house, she calls me. I ask her to come back but she cannot... I think during COVID-19 they were all at home so they took out their frustrations on my daughter... The police are of no use here. Yes, I have talked to the NGO and they are saying they can help me out but it is a lot of work. So, I have to wait and spend a lot of time going to meet them... My daughter often says 'I will commit suicide and I feel very helpless'. I try to tell her that she should come back home. One NGO is now giving her therapy. She has no say in her family and she keeps crying. I am at work so I cannot do anything. The place they live in is also not good for her kid. There needs to be more services for girls who are abused like this and also more consequences for those who do things like this to girls."

- A parent/caregiver of married child, female, 44 years, Cachar, Assam, India, 25 November 2022.

4.3.3 Gender norms within child marriage

4.3.3.1 Division of household labour and income-generating activities during COVID-19

Gender norms and values relating to roles and responsibilities of married girls in the home have been exacerbated as a result of the pandemic. Most girls, boys and parents reported that, within marriage, girls carry out the household tasks while boys and men earn an income. This was also consistently the expectation communicated during FGDs. Across the research locations, it was the norm for married girls to take on all household responsibilities, even if female in-laws were living in the home. Participants tended to indicate that this has not changed during COVID-19.

> "I am at home all the time cooking, cleaning, preparing tiffin for my husband and taking care of my in-laws. My husband goes outside to work and earns to provide for us. During COVID my husband was also doing some household work as he could not really go out to work... I also don't have too much time to go away from home because if I leave, who will do the household chores?... As I have not completed my studies, I don't have any hopes and dreams. I don't think I can do anything else with my life. I now have to take care of my family and son."
>
> - A married adolescent, female, 19 years, Cachar, Assam, India, 23 November 2022.

Some noted that COVID-19 has shifted traditional gender role dynamics. It was reported that, sometimes, males helped with housework more during COVID-19 when they were unable to work, with some believing that this meant girls carried out less household labour during COVID-19. A few girls reported that their husbands continue to support with some household labour even after returning to work after COVID-19. Interestingly, there were examples of married boys or young men supporting their wives within the home, despite acknowledging that this goes against the norm, indicating some positive changes among the younger generation surrounding the expectations of gender roles within marriage. However, this was rare, and participants generally appeared constrained by dominant social norms relating to gender roles within the household.

> "I love supporting my wife, but only when my mother is not around. If mum is not here, I wash the dishes to help her. When she's washing clothes, I help clean it. **[Why do you only do it when your mother is not here?]** My mum will be angry. **[Why will she be angry?]** In Nepalese culture, when you support your wife... in this male-dominated society people say such things are women's tasks. When someone from an older generation sees their son helping their daughter- in-law, then they feel that their son is dominated by the daughter-in-law. **[So you don't think like that, are you happy to help?]** Of course. Sometimes I bring her something nice to eat, and I hide it secretly so my mother can't see."
>
> - A married adolescent, male, 22 years, Surkhet, Karnali, Nepal, 11 December 2022.

When asked about difficulties children faced within their marriage as a result of COVID-19, girls and boys often reported that they had trouble generating income. Financial hardship during COVID-19 was a common issue experienced by married children. In keeping with traditional gender roles, married boys indicated the struggles they faced in trying to provide for their wives and families during COVID-19.

> "I thought married life was easy. Now I find it more difficult... I find the overall responsibilities hard. If I don't have work one day, I feel like it's a loss. I could have earned that day to take care of my pregnant wife along with family expenses, etc. **[Do you think COVID has played any part in how difficult things are at the moment?]** Yes, because work opportunities have become less, making everything harder."
>
> - A married adolescent, male, 18 years, Bagerhat, Khulna, Bangladesh, 29 November 2022.

Increased financial hardship meant that some married girls who had previously not worked were engaging in labour during COVID-19 to try and increase their family income. Means of income generation for married girls within the home included sewing or assisting husbands and in-laws with agricultural labour. Income generation was often reported to be inconsistent for girls, and it was clear that household work was prioritized over girls' employment. Even where girls were employed, all reported that they also had to carry out housework.

> "Even if I work outside [as a social worker] I have to do the household chores... My mother- in-law doesn't help at all; I have to wash her clothes. He [my husband] tries to help me when he can, like on Fridays he stays home to help me."
>
> - A married adolescent, female, 18 years, Bagerhat, Khulna, Bangladesh, 28 November 2022.

4.3.3.2 Decision-making in the home

A prevailing theme across research locations was that girls make few decisions in the home. The most common narrative was that girls abide by the will of their husbands and fathers-in-law, and that COVID-19 has not changed this dynamic.

> "My husband and my in-laws make all decisions. It was my husband's decision to elope, then it was his decision to marry someone else and then it was his decision to send me back to my home. Even if I fight, no one listens to me."
>
> - A married adolescent, female, 18 years, Hailakandi, Assam, India, 18 November 2022.

Girls were often fearful that if they did not abide by their husbands' decisions, they would experience emotional and physical violence. Some girls indicated that they would never question their husband's demands and are happy to do what he says, whereas others stated that they try to speak up for what they want, but it does not change anything; ultimately, girls have to follow their husbands' and in-laws' instructions. There was no evidence to suggest that increased income generation by girls during COVID-19 had led to a shift in decision-making dynamics or increased girls' autonomy within marriage.

Married boys and young men often acknowledged that they make most of the decisions within the home, although some indicated that their parents make the decisions. However, it was common for them to state that parents and in-laws would take their views into consideration. They reported that, even once they were married, they respect their mothers and follow their instructions about decisions within the marriage. The role of mothers in decision-making in the home was a particularly prominent norm in Surkhet (Karnali, Nepal).

Often, boys and young men stated that they made decisions jointly with their wife; indeed, from their perspective, decision-making often seemed balanced between the genders in the home. There were also some examples of girls feeling that their husbands consulted them and took their thoughts into consideration when making decisions. Again, the primary narrative was that COVID-19 has not changed this dynamic.

4.3.3.3 Childbearing and access to sexual and reproductive health

One of the common themes for married girls during COVID-19 related to their childbearing responsibilities. Although the danger of early childbirth was widely perceived across all locations as a reason for girls not to marry young, in reality, many married girls under the age of 18 had children during COVID-19.

There were many examples of married girls feeling that they had little say in decisions relating to childbirth. Many girls said that it was their duty to provide their husband with a child when he demanded it, even if they did not feel ready.

> "I am seven months pregnant. After one year of marriage, my in-laws said, 'why are you not getting pregnant?' They pressurized me and taunted me and my parents. They used abusive language too. That's why I had to conceive... [COVID-19] has had an impact, because my in-laws were worried... [due] to restrictions and loss of income, they asked me to move to my parents' [house] for my delivery. They are unable to bear my child's expenses."
>
> - A married adolescent, female, 17 years, Sheikhpura, Bihar, India, 14 November 2022.

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Girls' experiences of childbirth also highlight that COVID-19 did not lead to changes in existing gender norms and attitudes. Many girls reported facing pressure from their husbands or in-laws to have a child, experiencing discrimination from neighbours if they did not have a child soon after marriage, being abused if they were unable to conceive and being threatened by in-laws if they wanted an abortion. As a result girls often had a child against their own wishes. Girls were pressured to have children even though families would financially struggle to support the baby during COVID-19.

"I am seven months pregnant. After one year of marriage, my in-laws said, 'why are you not getting pregnant?' They pressurized me and taunted me and my parents. They used abusive language too. That's why I had to conceive... [COVID-19] has had an impact, because my in-laws were worried... [due] to restrictions and loss of income, they asked me to move to my parent's [house] for my delivery. They are unable to bear my child's expenses."

- A married adolescent, female, 17 years, Sheikhpura, Bihar, India, 14 November 2022.

There were mixed reports regarding access to support for SRH during COVID-19. It was relatively common for married girls and their husbands to report using contraceptives during COVID-19, including the implant, injections and the contraceptive pill, but other forms of SRH care was limited, although it is not entirely clear if this was worse during COVID-19. In Dhanusha (Madhesh, Nepal), for example, it was common for married girls to fall pregnant quickly after marriage, experienced miscarriages during COVID-19 and fall pregnant again in a short space of time. This suggests that, here particularly, there may have been a lack of access to SRH services. However, even in this location, where early childbirth seemed to particularly common during COVID-19, one young woman reported that she had accessed family planning awareness programmes and that COVID-19 had not impacted access to contraceptives.

Some barriers to accessing SRH during COVID-19 included increased financial hardship and difficulties in affording contraceptives, the cost and availability of transportation to obtain contraceptives and challenges for SRH workers in accessing communities during COVID-19 lockdowns. Several children and young women reported that they only became aware of contraceptive methods after having had children, or that they had not heard of contraceptives at all. Some participants indicated they did not have permission from their husbands or in-laws to take contraceptives. Mothers of married daughters stated that they were unhappy with their daughters undergoing early childbirth (particularly due to the dangers it poses for girls' health), but that the decision lay with in-laws or husbands. Some girls experienced abuse when they were unable to have a child.

For the married girls who gave birth during lockdown, many experienced complications during childbirth and faced difficulties accessing support from health visitors or attending hospital. This was a common theme in Sylhet City (Sylhet, Bangladesh). Some girls were fearful about the impacts of having children during the pandemic, including the health risks of catching COVID-19. Others highlighted that the costs associated with childbirth were particularly challenging during COVID-19, when financial resources were limited.

4.3.4 Access to education within marriage

A dominant narrative across the research locations was that once girls were married, they were no longer able to continue their education. Lack of access to education during COVID-19 was one of the primary drivers of child marriage during this time. In locations in Bangladesh, it appears to be common for families to tell girls they can continue education when married, but then forbid it after marriage. Parents and in-laws remain unsupportive of girls' education after marriage, particularly for girls who enter into self-initiated marriages.

> "This is not possible; it does not happen and nobody would accept it. Parents will say if you cared about your education, you would have done it [gone to school] in the first place and not got married. You made your choice."
>
> - FGD with parents/caregivers, female, 26–65 years, Sylhet City, Sylhet, Bangladesh, 22 November 2022.

There were, however, examples where girls continued engaging in education even after getting married during COVID-19, at least for a while. Some girls reported that their parents, husband and in-laws were supportive of education, while others reported that they did not have the full support of everyone. It was rare for girls to remain in education if living with their husbands and in-laws, but it was slightly more common for girls who continued to live at home with their own parents after marriage (particularly in India).

> "After marriage she [my wife] continued to study for a year and had to stop because local people used to comment on her. She's very pretty and people disturbed her."
>
> - A married adolescent, male, 18 years, Bagerhat, Khulna, Bangladesh, 29 November 2022.

> "I was pregnant but could not go for regular check-ups as there was no way to get to the hospital. I also had to deliver my baby at home with the help of the health workers in the village. My husband did not have work and so we did not have much money in the house at that time and with my pregnancy and baby, expenses of the family went up."
>
> - A married adolescent, female, 19 years, Assam, India.

[299] Individual interview with married adolescent, female, 19 years, Dhanusha, Madhesh Province, Nepal, 8 December 2022.

When asked why girls were unable to continue their education within marriage, COVID-19 was rarely cited as a direct reason. Rather, prevailing gender norms tended to be the primary contributing factor for married girls being out of school. Norms included fears for girls' safety and control of girls' sexuality (particularly relating to a husband's jealousy); men worrying about educated girls leaving them; or other boys "disturbing" girls at school. Girls often stated that their husbands and in-laws did not want them to go to school because they saw no benefit to it: girls would not be earning a living afterwards. Other reasons included the fact that within marriage, girls' primary responsibility is carrying out housework and looking after their children.

> "He didn't like me going outside because if I continued school, I would have to physically go in. He said 'why would you need to study because you're not going to earn?'"
>
> - A married youth, female, 22 years, Bagerhat, Khulna, Bangladesh.

However, it was not only girls who were unable to continue education once married. There were cases where married boys had to leave education after marriage to fulfil their responsibility to provide financially for their wife and family, particularly due to COVID-19-inflicted financial hardship.

> "I was in college and my wife was in class 10. I continued one more year and she did not. **[Why did you both stop at that time?]** Financial problems and I could not manage the new responsibilities, married life and education. **[What new responsibilities were there?]** Responsibilities of my wife and [I had to] earn a living for both us."
>
> - A married youth, male, 21 years, Bagerhat, Khulna, Bangladesh, 30 November 2022.

4.3.5 Separation of couples married as children during COVID-19

A theme that arose from the study was that COVID-19 led to an increase in separation. Reasons for this included greater conflict, abuse and violence within marriage as a result of financial hardship and increased time spent together in the home. Additionally, it was a common perception that self-initiated marriages were more likely to end in separation, because children enter into these relationships ill-prepared and lacking understanding of the responsibilities of marriage.

Among girls who were interviewed, there were several instances where they had separated from their husbands as a result of abuse. For example, in Gaibandha (Rangpur, Bangladesh), a 19-year-old woman described her experience of an arranged child marriage to a man who abused substances. She reported that he would beat and burn her, cut her with a knife and emotionally abuse her by telling her she was ugly. She said that her parents tried to encourage her to remain with him and work through the marriage, but she left as she could not tolerate the pain. Often, these divorces were not formalized, as marriages were not formally registered in the first place.

> "I was given in marriage by my parents to a man when I was 16 years old and just after my first marriage, the lockdown occurred. Because of job loss and various frustrations, my husband started fighting with me a lot. He first started abusing me and slowly he also started being violent with me. During the first lockdown, I started talking to a boy, he was in my neighbourhood. Slowly I used to share all my pain and grief with him, so I fell in love with him and as soon as the lockdown was over we ran away and got married. My parents are not talking to me because of my decision but I have no regrets, because I was very miserable in that marriage."
>
> - A married youth, female, 20 years, Udaipur, Rajasthan, India, 14 January 2022.

Despite the reported increase in separations of child marriages during COVID-19, it remained the norm that separation was not accepted in the community. Girls continue to be stigmatized and blamed for the separation, even if they are fleeing abuse. It was commonly reported that it was easier for boys to leave marriages than girls, and that males do not face the same stigma. Girls reported fearing separating from their husband due to the stigma they would face in the community. This appears to be linked to the drivers of child marriage surrounding family honour, social pressure, regulation and perceptions

of girls' sexuality, girls being a financial burden, girls being unable to achieve economic independence and the impact of dowry practices, which is underpinned by structural gender inequality.

> "For boys there is a different perception. They say 'don't worry, if the girl left, you can get another girl and a beautiful life.' Boys get positive encouragement, but girls do not. **[Why do you think there is a difference between boys and girls?]** Here girls are weaker, because she doesn't have a job or economic security, so society doesn't give her the proper respect."
>
> - FGD with adolescents, male, 14–17 years, Surkhet, Karnali, Nepal, 10 December 2022.

> "[Is the girl accepted when her husband leaves her?] She is not accepted into the family or the community. **[Why?]** The parents taunt her, they say that 'you went off according to your choice so why are you coming back?' The community criticizes her for choosing her own marriage. Often the family rejects her so she has to find a place to live on her own. **[Are boys treated the same when they leave marriages?]** The son often is accepted, or he would leave for another woman. Parents are more accepting of men. Parents say: 'if it doesn't work out you can try again in another marriage.'"
>
> - FGD with parents/caregivers, female, 26–65 years, Sylhet City, Sylhet, Bangladesh, 22 November 2022.

Additionally, there was a strong attitude that girls could not leave self-initiated marriages: if girls make their own choice to marry, it was felt, they do not have the right to seek support to escape a situation of their own making. The only exception in attitudes towards separation seems to be in Nabarangpur (Odisha, India), where it was commonly reported that both boys and girls can leave marriages, have equal rights to do so, and will be accepted in the community. However, it was not clear why this was common in this location.

4.3.6 Conclusion

COVID-19 may have exacerbated the impacts of existing power dynamics within marriage that place girls in a subordinate position as compared to husbands and in-laws.

The most significant way that COVID-19 appears to have impacted these dynamics in the research locations was the increase in violence against girls by husbands and in-laws reported in FGDs relating to common perceptions, experiences and the witnessing of abuse. This appears to be associated with financial stress and frustrations from increased time in the home. However, it is clear that the underlying drivers of violence and abuse against married girls are associated with gendered power dynamics, rigid social norms relating to gender roles and a strong sense of entitlement to and control by men over their wives.

Girls also reported feeling a great sense of social isolation from their families and friends once married, though they were unable to pinpoint the pandemic's influence on this isolation. Families also struggled with income generation during the pandemic, and the consequential financial hardships meant more women were engaging in paid employment. However, there was no evidence that this afforded women more agency or decision-making power within the household.

Girls' experiences of childbirth and continued pressures from husbands/in-laws to have children appear not to have been influenced by the COVID-19 context, though access to health care during this time likely impacted on their health. It is unclear if access to SRH services was affected by COVID-19, or whether these were pre-existing, cultural attitudes towards these services more generally.

There was also an increased rate of marriage separation, though it remains the norm that separation is not an acceptable practice within communities.

[300] Individual interview with married adolescent, female, 19 years, 24 November 2022.

05
Conclusions

The changed context due to COVID-19 had a profound impact on the lives of children and families in the research locations; the consequences of which are still being felt today. In terms of child marriage **practices and attitudes** to child marriage, a strong narrative emerged in the research locations that self-initiated marriages increased during COVID-19. However, caution should be exercised in interpreting this, as there appears to be a range of situations that are referred to as self-initiated marriages in which, in fact, little agency in decision-making is accorded to girls. Conversely, some arranged marriages during COVID-19 were reported to be love marriages that turned into arranged marriages, in an attempt to preserve family honour. At times, the fear that a self-initiated marriage would take place appears to have driven pre-emptive arranged marriages. Overall, arranged marriages appear to have remained the dominant form of marriage in the research locations during COVID-19, but there is a degree of complexity involved in trying to definitively categorize a self-initiated versus arranged marriage. Since this was a qualitative study that focused on perceptions, it is important not to definitively conclude that perceptions of steep increases in self-initiated child marriage are reflective of true trends.

The research found that the pandemic, along with the associated lockdowns, movement restrictions and containment measures, shaped the factors that drive and moderate child marriage in the research locations across all three countries. At the **structural level**, an overarching theme was that prevailing social and gender norms that limit girls' autonomy, keep girls in the home carrying out care-based roles, stigmatize and exert control over girls' sexuality, and normalize the abuse of girls were accentuated during COVID-19. Shifting these norms in communities is essential to prevent child marriage and the realization of girls' rights more generally. The pandemic appears to have compounded the influence of dowry practices in driving child marriage. During COVID-19, dowry was seen as a means of quickly generating income for families in economic hardship. At the same time, financial hardship tended to lead to a reduction in dowry practices, so was regarded as an opportunity for parents to marry daughters for a significantly lower price. Legal and policy frameworks remained unchanged during COVID-19, though the implementation of laws aimed at preventing and addressing child marriage became more challenging. However, this may not have had a significant impact on child marriage rates or practices, given the weak law enforcement and highly restricted access to justice for children and families prior to COVID-19.

More substantial COVID-19 impacts were evident at the **community level**. The limited access to education caused by COVID-19 restrictions meant that many parents viewed marriage as the best option for their daughters, who, due to prevailing social norms, were considered burdens in the home. The growth in the number of boys who entered the workforce to contribute essential income for their families appears to have driven child marriage, owing to the belief that these boys were ready for marriage at a younger age. While it seems intuitive that a COVID-19-associated ban on large wedding ceremonies may have moderated child marriage, in fact it appears that the ban was regarded as a great opportunity for parents to marry their children at lower cost and with less threat of legal repercussions. While the pandemic disrupted service delivery for those vulnerable to, or victims of, child marriage, the extent of these impacts is not clear due to the limited access to these services prior to COVID-19, especially in rural areas.

Drivers of child marriage within the **family environment** were also significantly impacted by COVID-19. The financial crises and increased poverty levels families faced as a result of the pandemic drove many parents to marry their daughters in order to alleviate their financial burdens, with children from larger households being particularly vulnerable. This financial stress, paired with more people being at home due to COVID-19 restrictions, also caused greater instability and tension and violence within the family environment, which was an influential factor in children choosing to marry (where this was possible). Familial duty and parental pressure remain prominent reasons why children marry, though the impact of COVID-19 on this driver is difficult to ascertain. Return migration was another notable driver of child marriage in the research locations, as many parents saw the influx of returnee migrant boys and men as an opportunity to find eligible grooms for their daughters. Moreover, the loss of remittances meant families fell into deeper financial difficulty, driving child marriage.

The impacts of COVID-19 were perhaps most overtly evident in the drivers of child marriage at the **individual level.** Access to online communication and mobile phones was typically reported as a significant driver of child marriage. It drove self-initiated marriages as it gave children the opportunity to connect with new people and assert their own agency in their relationship and marriage choices. While this may have driven some self-initiated marriages, many parents were driven to arrange their children's marriage in reaction, as self-initiated relationships and elopements were culturally seen as a stain on a family's honour.

The **situation of girls within marriage** worsened as a result of COVID-19. The COVID-19 context appears to have exacerbated the impacts of existing power dynamics within marriage that place girls in a subordinate position to husbands and in-laws. The most significant implication of this was found to be an increase in violence against girls by husbands and in-laws. This appears to have been triggered by financial stress and frustration from increased time in the home; however, it is clear that the underlying drivers of violence and abuse against married girls are associated with gendered power dynamics, rigid social norms relating to gender roles and a strong sense of entitlement to and control over girls by their husbands. Girls also reported feeling a great sense of social isolation from their families and friends once married, though they were unable to pinpoint the influence of the pandemic on this isolation. While more women entered employment to support their families, this often led to a double burden for girls required to fulfil household responsibilities and their jobs. There also appears to have been an increased rate in marriage separation during COVID-19, though the norm remains that separation is not an acceptable practice, and girls are disproportionately blamed for, and therefore experience the repercussions of, separation.

06
Recommendations

Based on this research, policy and programming recommendations have been identified, and where possible, the stage of crisis programming has been indicated. While the recommendations arise from a specific context, that of COVID-19, they are intended to be generally applicable to similar crisis contexts.

6.1 Recommendation

Support data collection and research to gain a more concrete understanding of the prevalence and dynamics of child marriage during crises **(preparedness and during pandemic/crisis)**.

- UNICEF should support/carry out quantitative research to ascertain whether the drivers documented in this study resulted in an increase in child marriage rates. Although household surveys can determine trends in overall child marriage, a key gap in quantitative data is that it does not disaggregate marriages that are arranged versus those that are self-initiated. As has been documented throughout this report, this distinction is crucial to plan and implement programmes to prevent child marriage.
- Support research, policy development and programmatic guidance to garner a more nuanced understanding of the spectrum of forced, arranged and self-initiated child marriages and the dynamics relating to agency and decision-making in child marriage, particularly during pandemics and other humanitarian contexts, and how to respond to it. This is in order to ensure more effective programmes can be developed to prevent and respond to child marriage and its varying dynamics and contexts.
- UNICEF should ensure that child marriage indicators | are included in information management systems for child protection and gender-based violence to measure access to and effectiveness of different interventions aimed at preventing and responding to child marriage during times of crisis.
- UNICEF should include child marriage-related data collection in its regular crisis situation assessments.

6.2 Recommendation

Address the overarching impacts of social and gender norms and beliefs that are the core drivers of child marriage, many of which were exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic **(preparedness and post-pandemic/crisis)**.

- UNICEF should support social behaviour-change programmes that aim to shift beliefs to recognize the value of girls in the home beyond their role as caregivers, particularly relating to the economic contributions girls can make following the completion of education. Positive shifts and relaxation in norms relating to gender roles occurring during the pandemic (e.g., husbands' contributions to household chores; the relaxation of restrictions on the access of girls and women to the labour market) should be harnessed in social behaviour change post-pandemic programming.

- Understanding of the importance of girls' education, particularly in relation to future employment and income generation opportunities, should be enhanced so parents prioritize girls' education. The COVID-19 context, in which restrictions on access to the labour market by girls and women were relaxed, and demonstrated the importance of diverse family income streams, could be used to demonstrate the importance of educating girls.

- Social behaviour change programming should aim to reduce stigmas around and control of girls' sexuality, and support children's autonomy in their choice of romantic partners. Work should focus on shifting attitudes in relation to reducing stigmatization of adolescent romantic relationships (and that relationships do not necessarily need to result in marriage), and the importance of children having a choice in their future and their partner.

- Work should be done to reduce the stigma against separation, particularly for girls experiencing abuse. Shifting attitudes and increasing acceptance of separation is essential to ensure the safety of married girls and to empower girls to leave abusive situations. Particular attention should be paid to the provision of support for girls leaving self-initiated marriages, with additional consideration to other factors that put girls in such marriages at increased risk of ostracization (such as inter-caste marriages).

6.3 Recommendation

Increase avenues to services and support and harness online and mobile phone technology to link to support and services **(preparedness, during pandemic/crisis and post-pandemic/crisis)**.

- UNICEF should support the strengthening of clear referral and reporting channels for child marriage and consistent consequences for perpetrators to encourage reporting within communities and prevent child marriage. Additionally, less punitive avenues (i.e., not involving the police or justice system) for accessing support should be strengthened to address the reluctance of children and the wider community to report child marriage. Referral and reporting channels should be designed so that they are able to be utilized during crises.

- UNICEF should support evidence generation on how children accessed services (and the barriers to accessing services) during the COVID-19 context. Policies and programmes that respond to these barriers and strengthen access during times of crisis should be developed. This could include the development of strengthened online and mobile-phone based outreach and service delivery, measures to ensure access to the internet and phones and the development of legal or policy frameworks that protect continued delivery of essential face-to-face services during crises, including law enforcement, child protection services and social welfare. There is a need for increased and sustained government budget allocations to support prevention and response services for violence against children and women. This includes expanding and strengthening the statutory social welfare system with qualified case workers that do community and family outreach to ensure the linking to appropriate services, counselling and psychosocial care.

- UNICEF should work with governments to ensure that laws, policies and operational guidance are in place setting out that service providers who support children at risk of or in marriage including social welfare service providers, child protection professionals, health-care providers, counsellors, etc. are designated essential workers and continue their service delivery during times of crisis.
- Child marriage prevention and response programmes should consider how to capitalize on the increased use of internet and communication technologies (while recognizing the specific needs and challenges for children who do not have access to these technologies). In particular, child marriage prevention initiatives should consider how children can be reached and supported through these means, and how the general increase in digital access can be best used for social behaviour change and to provide information relating to support available for girls to prevent marriage and respond to abuse within marriage.
- Communication and support services relating to the prevention of gender-based violence should incorporate coping mechanisms for stressors which have increased as a result of COVID-19. Increased awareness of how stressors (particularly increased financial pressure) can lead to increased domestic violence and teaching alternative coping mechanisms to boys and men is important to prevent the abuse of married girls. Additionally, violence prevention and support for girls should be extended to consider abuse from in-laws, and factors underpinning this abuse (including dowry payments and norms relating to girls' childbearing responsibilities).

6.4 Recommendation

Increase sustainable and effective economic opportunities and empower girls **(preparedness)**.

- UNICEF's household and adolescent economic empowerment programming should include consideration of how financial instability can drive child marriage during crises. In particular, it should ensure that programmes are resilient to crisis contexts. This is particularly important for rural areas and locations where there are fewer economic opportunities and where education is generally less accessible.

The provision of consistent social support through crises is essential for the prevention of child marriage, and financial support for re-enrolment is required to ensure the continuation of children's education.

6.5 Recommendation

Understand and address the unique vulnerabilities of marginalized children and families in child marriage programming **(during pandemic/crisis)**.

- Programming should pay particular attention to, and be inclusive of, marginalized communities (scheduled castes and religious minorities) in addition to other vulnerable groups, such as girls in tribal communities who may be particularly vulnerable during times of crisis.

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Unmasking vulnerabilities: The impact of COVID-19 on the determinants of child marriage in South Asia