

Early Marriage and Child Grooms: A case study from in and around Nepalgunj, Nepal



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**Early Marriage and Child Grooms: A case study
from in and around Nepalgunj, Nepal¹**

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¹ The picture on the cover is of the Swayambhunath (Monkey Temple) situated in the Kathmandu Valley, west of the city of Kathmandu (photo is author's own)

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this work to the wide range of people who were involved in my research in Amsterdam, Kathmandu, Nepalgunj, and Lumbini. The unwavering help of the organisations that I worked with, especially Child Workers in Nepal (CWIN) and the Centre for Research on Environment, Health, and Population Activities (CREHPA), resulted in having had access to in-depth and fascinating stories from a demographic that has not had sufficient attention in studies centred understanding child marriage. I also thank the research participants who shared their personal and often sensitive life stories and experiences with me, and it is for this reason that I hope this research can effectively inform further projects and programmes concerned with child rights, engaging men and boys in ending harmful social practices, and building child marriage-free communities.

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Abstract

Efforts to build child marriage-free communities, and creating societies in which individuals have full agency in deciding if, when, and whom they marry are becoming a common presence in the development agendas of international organisations and governments around the world. However, the focus of such projects and programmes has been tilted towards engaging with young brides and the girls vulnerable to becoming one. Although numerically speaking, far greater numbers of girls around the world are, at a young age, entered into marriage by their families, in certain cultures it is common practice for the same to happen with boys and young men. Because of the greater attention given to females within child marriage, attributed in part to an on-going conflation of gender-women-development, there is a dearth of knowledge and understanding surrounding the concept of ‘child grooms’, namely boys who have been married before the age of 18. In response, this study seeks to fill a knowledge gap around the practices of early marriage that include ‘child grooms’, and the subsequent ways in which these individuals navigate their lives with this label. Expanding discussions on masculinity and gender under a gender relational framework, the study elucidates the ways in which expected behaviours and roles that constitute what it means ‘to be a man’ have bearing on the lives of young men and boys.

Data was gathered in Nepalgunj, the capital city of Banke District in midwestern Nepal, using complimentary methods of participatory exercises, focus group discussions, and interviews. The research shows that the timing of specific marriage rituals within early marriage have a direct bearing on when the child groom must assume the roles and responsibilities associated with being married, and specifically conjugal life. These variances problematise the definitions and assumptions that are embedded in the development field’s existing ideas of child marriage amongst young men and boys, and warrant more contextually specific understandings. Moreover, the study finds the label of ‘being married’ to be a source of both positive and negative social capital for unmarried and married young males within spaces and places of their lives that are hostile to the practice of child marriage (schools and NGO programmes) and those that support it (family). Overall, the label of ‘child groom’ gains meaning and brings with it challenges at different points and in different

settings in the life of those boys and young men who are married at an early age. Although the study's respondents and the cultural practices that they are part of are specific to Nepalgunj, the findings concerning the bearing that child marriage has on the lives of young boys and men can be used to inform future activities aimed at engaging men and boys in ending harmful social issues.

Keywords: child marriage; early marriage; child grooms; masculinity; social capital

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List of Acronyms

CREHPA – Center for Research on Environment, Health and Population Activities

CWIN – Child Workers in Nepal

VDC – Village District Community

1). Introduction

1.1 Contextualising Early Marriage

The geographical and numerical scale of early marriage proves that the practice transcends religion, ethnicity, and culture, and justifies its place at the top of the agendas of a myriad of international development organisations, non-governmental organisations, governments, policymakers, and practitioners. High-level development organisations regularly refer to the depth of the issue – most recently, UNICEF’s State of the World’s Children (2016) stated that over 700 million people alive today were married as children and a third of girls in the developing world were married before the age of 18. The Mission Statement of ‘Girls Not Brides’, the largest global partnership ever established at ending the practice of child marriage is explicit in its commitment to working with over 700 civil society organisations across 90 countries at all levels of engagement, from community to global. The breadth and depth of the partnership rests on a clear understanding that the process of child marriage, the reasons for it occurring, and the way that it is carried out, vary across and between communities. As a result, they clearly state that ‘solutions must be local and contextual’ (UNICEF, 2017).

However, when consulting the documentation and Theory of Change of the ‘Girls Not Brides’ partnership, it is clear to see that the overwhelming focus of intervention is related to improving the situation of young girls and women who were married at an early age. Whilst this fits with a notion that child marriage is the formal marriage or informal union where one of the parties is under 18 years of age, ‘Girls Not Brides’ explicitly states that “child marriage is any formal marriage or informal union where one or **both** of the parties are under 18 years of age” (Girls Not Brides, 2017, emphasis researcher’s own). The inclusion of the ‘both’ in this phrase is of note, because it opens up the possibility that child marriage can also be between a young boy and a young girl. Indeed, according to UNICEF global databases based on DHS and MICS 2007-2014 (UNICEF Global Databases, 2016), ‘in nine countries, more than 10 per cent of boys are married before 18):

- Central African Republic – 28%
- Madagascar – 13%

- Lao People's Democratic Republic – 13%
- Nauru – 12%
- Honduras – 12%
- Comoros – 12%
- Marshall Islands – 12%
- Nepal – 11%
- Cuba – 11%

Coupled with this data, UNICEF (2017) explains that 'child marriage affects girls in far greater numbers than boys, and with more intensity. However, data on the number of boys affected by child marriage is limited, making it difficult to draw definitive conclusions on its status and progress.' From statements such as this, despite the burgeoning attendance to ending early marriage, there is still a dearth of knowledge regarding the ways in which the complex and contextually specific practices of child marriage affect young boys and men.

From a gender-relational perspective, a failure to better understand the lived experiences of child grooms, and the ways in which the gendered norms and hierarchies of masculinities that typify the practice affect their lives, hinders efforts to improve gender equality in international development. Moreover, and (more broadly) it also perpetuates the notion that Gender and Development policies and agendas have the potential to focus on (young) women alone, and push male experiences to the background.

The following discussion will shed more light on the place of young men and boys when addressing child marriage, before moving on to explain the rationale behind focusing on the experiences of a demographic (child grooms) which is numerically less prevalent and said to be affected with less intensity by child marriage than girls.

1.2 Young Men and Boys within the Discourse on Early Marriage²

The limited attendance to collecting statistical data on the numbers of boys who are married before the age of 18, as well as better understanding their lived experiences, appears at odds with the wider gender-responsive trends in the ‘development agenda’. One of the agenda’s dominant mandates has been to understand how varying notions of masculinity within communities are defined in ways that sustain gender inequalities and perpetuate violence and discrimination against females. For example, The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women states that having a conceptual framework to understand how ‘socially constructed ideals of manhood affect men’s attitudes, perceptions and behaviours and how these relate to the dynamics between men and women in a society and the use of violence’ (UN Women, “Men & Boys”, 2012, para. 4) should be a prerequisite for any programme.

Despite this high-level rhetoric, a rare report by Greene *et al* (2015) titled *Engaging Men and Boys to End the Practice of Child Marriage*, highlights the continuing ‘nominal attention’ given to males in *changing and being vulnerable* to early marriage. Connell (1995) bemoans that ‘doing gender’ is often typified by an explicit focus on the experiences of women and girls, and it is clear to see in many early marriage policy documents that there is a lack of critical engagement with child grooms, that is those boys who were, or are to be, married in a formal or informal union before the age of 18 (UNICEF, 2001). For example, in *Child Marriage and the Law*, UNICEF acknowledges that ‘although this issue affects boys as well as girls, given that the tradition of early marriage has a disproportionately negative impact on the girl child, the focus of this paper will be on girls’ (2014:1). From preliminary research, this rhetoric is a normative characteristic of many policy and practice documentation relating to early marriage, and arguably has narrowed the lens of engagement and focused resources onto girls. The lack of engagement with young grooms has been further compounded by the fact that in most communities that practise early marriage, men above the age of 18 marry younger girls, and are more likely to exercise

² ‘Early’/‘Child’ marriage will be used interchangeably throughout this proposal to describe the practice of marriage in which at least one spouse is under the age of 18. However, certain communities’ conceptions of what constitutes a ‘child’ do not correlate with the numerical ages presented in many documents on child marriage, and thus room has been given for research participants in this study to define their understandings of childhood/adolescence/adulthood on their own terms. Moreover, Nepali law states the legal age of marriage as 20 years old, which is in conflict with wider UN documents addressing this issue.

violent and discriminatory acts against their spouses (Bengali, 2015; ECPAT International and Plan International, 2015).

Girls are undoubtedly disproportionately victimised by the oppressive and dominating gendered hierarchies that surround the continuity of the practice of early marriage, both in terms of numbers, as well as 'inadequate socialisation, discontinuation of education, and great physiological and emotional damage' (UNICEF, 2001: 9). However, for a truly 'gendered' approach to understanding the practice, suffering in its many forms cannot be assumed to reside exclusively with girls. Attention must therefore be paid to the experiences of boys and men who are to be/may have also been married under the age of 18, so as to attempt to better understand the gendered pressures of young men more broadly. There is also a need to attend to the experiences of men and boys in order to bring about gender equality as opposed to attempting to improve women's rights alone.

Encapsulating this argument is conflicting evidence from UNICEF (2001), the Her Choice alliance (2016), and CARE (2016) concerning the process of child marriage. UNICEF highlights that the negotiating power of girls in families tends to be weak when approaching decisions as to if, when, and whom they marry. This notion is posited in comparison to boys who often possess a 'high decision-making capacity and are more involved when plans are made for their future' (UNICEF, 2001: 29). Whilst this may be true in *some* cases, by making this direct comparison between girls' and boys' agency in the union, policy documents miss the fact that there are instances of boys and men who are married before the age of 18 being coerced into marriage before they are psychologically, emotionally and physically prepared for the attitudinal and behavioural expectations associated with being a spouse at a young age. Adding to the evident complexity of early marriage involving child grooms, recent research by Her Choice (2016) and CARE (2016) actually highlight the *inexistence* of a child groom's agency in deciding if, when, and to whom he is married, undermining such normative outlooks that appear in so many policy documents. These stated contradictions in levels of agency and decision-making power are evidence that the mere nominal attention and inadequate research into the experiences of young grooms are unwarranted. In light of these varying experiences for young men and boys, statements such as 'unequal gender norms put a much higher value on boys and men than on girls and women' (UNFPA,

2012: 12) become homogenising and conflate the lived realities and experiences of young boys and men who are married before the age of 18.

1.3 'Conditions of the Advantage'

The contradictions and lack of understanding associated with young men and boys justifies a deconstruction and reconfiguration of their experiences within early marriage. However, care must be taken not to belittle the disproportionate effects that child brides experience with regards to gender discrimination that have catapulted early marriage to the top of many development agendas in the first place. Rather, this study seeks to redress the gaps in literature, programmes, and policies concerning the needs and experiences of men so as to move towards better understanding gender power dynamics and improving gender equality. This research works from a standpoint that acknowledges the higher societal value assigned to the male body, the *potential* for young men and boys to have increased agency, autonomy, and bargaining power in deciding if, when, and whom a male marries, and the ability to exercise oppressive behaviours over women and girls that are linked to dividends of assimilating with the dominant masculinity. This approach coincides with, as Frye aptly expresses, a need for social researchers to nuance notions of oppression and privilege so that they don't get 'stretched to meaningless' (1983:1). Yet concurrently, and drawing heavily on Connell (1995; 2005), this research will also attempt to understand how the privileged male position that has resulted in the nominal attention given to young grooms in policy and research is actually also situated within a particular gender order that imposes specific expectations and behaviours of masculinity upon men and boys. Connell (2005) describes this stance as an unpacking of the 'conditions of the advantage' of being male. For example, she refers to how social compulsions to be employed and to be sole wage earners, as well as proving fertility and virility, the handling of free expressions of sexuality vis-à-vis women, and taboos on expressing vulnerability can bring about both positive and negative effects on male wellbeing (Connell, 2005). Working with this notion, McIntosh's (1991) ideas about unpacking the 'invisible knapsack' of privilege granted to males becomes more complex in terms of both understanding the benefits granted to young grooms due to their gender (such as males possessing a level of practical agency related to if, when, and who they marry), but also how their lived experiences can be constrained by what Connell suggests are the 'conditions of the advantage'. With this notion, privilege and oppression

can be simultaneously experienced in different contexts, and not all experiences can be taken as positive and liberatory (McKeganey and Bloor, 1991). Indeed, male agency is still constrained by dominant forms of masculinity and the gender order within which it operates, in terms of expected behaviours and responsibilities surrounding what it means to be a 'good man'.

Notions of constrained male agency and the nuances of male privilege within Connell's work are filtering into very recent NGO reports and documents, which have, albeit briefly, attended to how traditional notions of gender regimes that are integral to early marriage may also negatively affect boys and men who are to be or have been married before the age of 18. CARE's (2016) *Tipping Point External Report* highlighted the dearth of understanding surrounding how grooms navigate the parental and domestic responsibilities imposed by early marriage, as well as how their livelihood aspirations are often incompatible with the realities of early marriage and parental and societal expectations surrounding wage-earning and fatherhood. Interestingly, the *Tipping Point External Report* was positioned in relation to how the actors involved in early marriage are ever-increasingly exposed to new, non-family venues of social interaction and ideational forces carrying messages that potentially differ from the gendered behavioural expectations of traditional and local contexts. Thus, another tenet of the present study will be a consideration of how the conditions of the advantage for young grooms are being further complicated by exposure to and immersion in spaces (such as schools and NGO programmes) that carry a distinctly anti-child marriage discourse. There is a wealth of literature that attends to how social change is influential in practices of marriage (Barber, 2004; Ghimire *et al*, 2006; Ghimire *et al*, 2014); the current study is expected to contribute to this field by better understanding how the label of 'being married at an early age' held by child grooms interacts with different venues of social interaction that can be both hostile and welcoming to the practice of child marriage.

Adding to the academic relevance of this study, the social relevance of how the research aims to understand how the dominant characteristics of what it means to 'be a man' in a particular context can oppress other forms of masculinity is not to be understated. By engaging with such issues, it is hoped that the research will lead to a wider understanding of the influences, attitudes, and perspectives of all the actors involved in the practice of early marriage and 'masculinity' more generally. Research into this area is also

inextricably linked to gender-responsive programs that involve men and boys as gatekeepers and community advocates 'in ways that transform gender relations and promote gender equity' (Greene *et al*, 2015:4), by shining a light on the struggles that men and boys face in marriage and the reasons for the continuation of the practice.

Furthermore, by engaging with males on the issue, it is hoped that the opportunity will be seized to establish solidarity and networks around which to mobilise in order to work towards strengthening efforts to build child marriage-free communities. Aside from stimulating gender responsive policy and practice within programmes that seek to bring about social change in this area, taking inspiration from CARE's 2015 *Dads Too Soon: The Child Grooms of Nepal* multimedia report, the research will attempt to fill a void in wider public understandings about the practice by circulating condensed and more accessible reiterations of the project's findings and interpretations to news outlets.

Working in conjunction with the Her Choice initiative, (a Dutch alliance of the Stichting Kinderpostzegels Nederland, The Hunger Project, International Child Development Initiatives (ICDI) and the University of Amsterdam) which strives towards building child marriage-free communities, I chose to locate this research in one of their working areas, Nepal. Whilst acknowledging intra-country variations in the prevalence of child grooms, Nepal has one of the highest rates of boys and men married before the age of 18 in the world. Standing at 11% based on the most recent data from the 2011 Nepal Demographic and Health Survey (2012), the figure pales in comparison to the 41% of women in the same situation in Nepal. However, as mentioned above, this figure is significant in the context of a truly gendered approach. The timing of the research is also important, due to the momentum that a Nepalese Child Marriage Strategy, produced by the Ministry of Women, Children and Social Welfare and supported by UNICEF Nepal and Girls Not Brides Nepal, has in the final stages of editing within the country's government. Despite having been delayed by the 2015 earthquake as well as a fuel crisis, initial drafts do make explicit mention of engaging men and boys in its theory of change to end early marriage.

1.4 Concluding Remarks

Attempts to fill the policy, academic, and programmatic gaps related to the experiences of men and boys (in this context concerning early marriage), are necessary to

formulate a deeper and more nuanced understanding of how gender's power dynamics play out in the real world. This study aligns with this notion, and rests on an argument that to facilitate moves towards gender equality, we must work outside of a social vacuum that solely focuses on women's rights and women's issues, and understates gender's relational nature.

1.5 Outline of Thesis

This thesis is divided into six chapters, the first of which has introduced child grooms as a subject of study and the relevance and motivations behind the research. Secondly, the theoretical foundation of this research will be expanded: the debate surrounding manifestations of masculinity, the practices that constitute these ideas, and the inbuilt crisis tendencies of masculinities in general will be discussed. The following research framework chapter shall bring together the subject of study and theory into a coherent set of research questions, and show how these will be answered from data collected in the field.

The empirical chapters of the study hone in on findings from the field, firstly concerning the realities of the marriage process involving child grooms and the relative levels of agency and decision-making power that young men and boys have in deciding if, when, and whom they marry. The second empirical chapter will discuss the findings related to the label of 'married early' as both a negative and positive form of social capital for married (and unmarried boys). In the final chapter, the main research question will be answered by bringing empirical findings into discussion with theory and existing literature with a purpose to drafting policy and practice recommendations for engaging with men and boys in early marriage. Future research avenues will also be mentioned.

2. Theoretical Framework

The following chapter presents the theoretical structure of this research. The first section introduces a *social constructionist relational view of gender* as a means by which to attend to how masculinity manifests itself through configurations of social practice. Secondly, the chapter draws upon the concept of *hegemonic masculinity* to reflect upon how socially-sanctioned and dominant scripts of masculine behaviour can simultaneously constrain and empower both men and women. The expected codes and behaviours associated with enacting hegemonic masculinity are then explained through *body-reflexive practices*. Drawing upon notions of masculinity's crisis tendencies, the sub-section *counter-hegemonic masculinities* posits the idea that different venues of social interaction and their associated discourses can subvert and problematise hitherto entrenched constructs of masculinity. Finally, and to avoid essentialising the experience of child grooms, the notion of *intersectionality* will be used as a means by which to understand that not all men and boys are oppressed and privileged in the same way, at the same time, and in the same contexts.

2.1 Social Constructionist Relational View of Gender

This research project's theoretical framework will draw heavily on existing work concerning gender, men, and masculinities, most notably that of Raewyn Connell. Moving away from the categorical understandings of gender apparent in many policy documents addressing early marriage that give nominal reference to men and boys, I propose operationalising a constructionist and relational understanding of gender based in societal systems and structures. Connell works with gender as a verb as opposed to a noun, explaining that masculinities themselves are patterns of social practice that do not necessarily have a fixed biological or hormonal connection to anatomical sex at birth. In other words, masculinities often refer to the male body, but are not determined by biology. Social constructionism's application to gender issues rests on the predication that the creation of meaning and the 'realities' that come from this process are socially situated. Ideas surrounding the social construction of gender have tended to focus on the asymmetrical balance of power that exists between men and masculinity and women and femininity. However, this configuration of power fails to acknowledge the extent to which

masculinity itself is not a fixed position, and that multiple competing masculine positions exist. Therefore, from a social constructionist standpoint, it is logical to unpack the configurations of social practices that constitute masculinities, be they hegemonic or not.

2.2 Hegemonic Masculinity

There is a growing body of research that attends to the pluralities, hierarchies, construction, and changing nature of masculinities. However, in development policy, there is still a strong conflation between gender-development-women (Enloe, 1990). Whilst this is somewhat understandable given the historic and continuing exclusion of, and gender-based violence towards, women connected to patriarchal structures and practices, Connell postulates that ‘to understand gender equalities it is essential to research the more privileged group as well as the less privileged’ (2005: 2). The behaviours and expectations of this more privileged group, here referring to men and boys, is dictated by the characteristics of a particular type of masculinity, described as ‘hegemonic masculinity’. This contentious concept can be explained as the culturally and socially dominant form of an idealised masculinity and its associated behaviours and roles that succeeds over other forms (Connell, 1995). Connell (2005) has sought to clarify hegemonic masculinity in *Masculinities*, explaining that there is no fixed type of hegemonic masculinity, but that it is rather, in Gramscian terms, the specific type (expectations, scripts of behaviour, attitudes) of masculinity that occupies that dominant position in any given time and space. Whilst hegemonic masculinity ‘guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and subordination of women’ (Connell, 2005: 77), it can also be taken to guarantee the subordination of that which is not akin to the hegemonic masculinity in a specific context. Therefore, hegemonic masculinity can simultaneously be used to better understand the gender systems that define, position, empower and constrain women as well as men through hierarchies of dominant and marginalised masculinities. It must also be acknowledged that a relational approach to gender and gender issues must also envisage masculinities as being configured by and through men’s relations with women, not solely among men themselves, but also through female enforcement of the ideal male (and female) gender roles (Haywood & Mac an Ghail, 2003).

2.3 Body-Reflexive Practices

When attempting to comprehend 'gender' through a social constructionist relational framework, one visualises it as always concerning a structure of gender relations, and that gender is a way in which wider social practice is therefore ordered. Connell (1995) conceptualises body-reflexive practices as the means through which wider socially sanctioned and expected ideas of hegemonic femininities and masculinities are embodied and enacted in practice. Whilst influential scholars such as Rubin (1975:159) explain how women are socially subordinated by body-reflexive practices that are typified by an 'obligatory heterosexuality' ingrained in the hegemonic masculinity of a specific space, Connell expands the idea by arguing that men and boys are also 'disciplined to (this) heterosexuality' (2005: 104). She understands this process of compulsory heteronormative socialisation as occurring through 'moments' of engagement with the heteronormative body-reflexive practices of hegemonic masculinity, in which the 'boy takes up the project of masculinity on his own' (*ibid.*). In the context of this research, that 'moment' of engagement is hypothesised to be marriage. It is therefore necessary to firstly understand the codes and behaviours of hegemonic masculinity and gender regimes of a particular space/place, and subsequently how males navigate and measure themselves against these 'idealized, abstract, dichotomous' gender behaviours (be they positive or negative) (Dimen & Goldner, 2010: 259). This argument gains salience when one assumes, as Judith Butler does, that identity is not typified by a unity of experience. For her, normative heterosexual socialised relations are rooted in conformity and consistence, and a failure 'to conform to norms of cultural intelligibility appear only as developmental failures of logical impossibilities' (Butler, 1990).

2.4 Counter-Hegemonic Masculinities

Drawing on Habermas' term 'crisis tendencies' to denote structural fractures in social systems that lead to social crisis, Connell (2005: 85) applies the concept to studies of masculinity to show masculinity's predisposition towards crisis in moments of non-conformity and inconsistency with the hegemonic masculinity. Whilst it is true that many men identify with and constitute themselves in relation to characteristics of hegemonic masculinity and the gender order 'because of the 'dividend' they get from patriarchal

systems' (Connell, 2005: 39), aligning with hegemonic masculinity is not a simple exercise in self-identification or 'relative consensus' (Jewkes *et al*, 2015: 113). Indeed, as Connell (2005) contends, hegemonic masculinity often sets an unreachable yet authoritative ideal that many men cannot comply with. As Johnson & Schulman (1989) contend, hegemonic masculinity must be expanded to understand the 'role entrapment' related to the pressure to follow hegemonic notions of masculinity, *and* the ways in which these ideas are being subverted and transformed. In other words, what mechanisms push masculinity into crisis? Barber (2004), Ghimire *et al* (2006), and Ghimire *et al* (2014) place the catalysts for masculinity's crisis tendencies in experiences relating to (non)formal education, nonfamily employment and living, media exposure, and NGO activities. These spaces and discourses expose individuals to certain beliefs and behavioural expectations that are often in contention with those within the normative gendered order. How and in what ways the more traditional notions of masculinity that typify the expectations in roles and behaviours of young men and boys associated with early marriage interact with these spaces is of particular relevance to this study.

2.4.1 Exposure to Alternative Masculinities

A growth in new venues of social interaction results in contact with often novel examples of behaviours and beliefs, which may carry alternative and/or conflicting discourses from those which constitute one's own gender order. In relation to the practice of early marriage, which is greatly influenced by familial expectations and beliefs, Jennings *et al* (2012), and Ghimire *et al* (2006: 1214) highlight messages that 'indicate that independence from parents and exercising one's own decision-making prerogatives may help in the goal of social mobility and achievement of the good life'. Cornwall and Lindisfarne (1994) and Cornwall (1997) contend that exposure to alternative masculinities and femininities and their associated body-reflexive practices can result in a cultural borrowing, conflation, and intertwining of ideas to produce new configurations that do not necessarily correspond to the familiar hegemonic masculinity. In Bourdieusian terms, one can conceptualise the exposure to new ideational forces as an accumulation of social and cultural capital that ultimately does or does not lead to shifts in social identity (Skeggs, 1997). Parallel to social interactions with, and exposure to, non-family experiences runs a similar process of acquiring 'capital' to fit into rigid categorical understandings of 'boy' and

'man' that come from the existence of a hegemonic masculinity. Taking inspiration from Lewis (1989) and Bourdieu (1977), the practice of early marriage and being married can be seen as a ritualised marker that permits a progression to sex roles that are socially sanctioned by and defensively endorse hegemonic masculinity. With this view of 'masculinity as an object of knowledge (that is)...always masculinity-in-relation' (Connell, 2005:44), one can begin to unpack the rise of ideational shifts and clashing of gender orders due to large scale social processes and the accrual of social and cultural capital, and its effects. It is therefore necessary to work with a theoretical framework that acknowledges the power struggles between normative expectations concerning the patriarchal gender order and ulterior manifestations of, and ideas about, masculinity that boys and men are increasingly becoming exposed to.

2.5 Intersectionality

As mentioned in the Introduction, the intricacies of the practice of child marriage vary within and between communities, and thus it is vital to avoid slipping into essentialism when approaching the lived experiences of child grooms. According to Brown (2012: 541), 'multiple registers' of oppression and privilege exist, and relating this back to Connell's ideas about masculinity, it can be stated that not all men are oppressed and privileged in the same way and in the same contexts. This idea gains salience when considering the specific subgroups that existing research states practice early marriage amongst boys, particularly related to race and socio-economic standing (UNICEF, 2017). Of particular relevance to this study will be the ways in which ideas surrounding intersectionality attend to the specificities of space and time when considering the ways in which having the label of 'married at an early age' is felt by married boys. Benefitting from ideas raised by Tucker (2010), intersectional theory in this study will be used to trace how boys and young men who are themselves carrying this marker of identity interact with spaces occupied by narratives that are both hostile and favourable to early marriage. As Brown (2012: 544) states, there has been sparse research into the ways in which 'work on sexualities intersects with age', and that which exists is often typified by a 'focus on hetero-patriarchal powers directed at controlling the young, especially women'. Since this study aims to expand discussion on child marriage beyond focusing solely on young brides, intersectional theory's application to

the ways in which these hetero-patriarchal powers intersect with the control of young boys and men's bodies in the context of early marriage is applicable.

2.6 Concluding Remarks

The theoretical framework chapter of this study has sought to explain that the male experience cannot be essentialised and homogenised, in just the same as any other category of analysis cannot be. Even though a setting can carry a dominant form of hegemonic masculinity, which is one that privileges certain codes and behaviours of what a man should be like, how he can enter the abstract notion of 'manhood', and how he should act thereon in, work by Connell exposes the incoherency of hegemonic masculinity. The crisis tendencies of masculinity arise when previously socially-sanctioned scripts of masculinity enacted by groups and individuals through body-reflexive practices come into contact with alternative scripts that potentially undermine, contest, or are subdued by the dominance of hegemonic masculinity. This process creates a dynamic pattern of oppression and privilege for men, solidifying the notion that there is no essential male experience, and men and boys experience being a male based on a variety of identity variables. The following chapter presents the research framework in which this thesis is based.

3). Research Framework

Introduction

Having situated this study in its wider social context and within existing theory, the following chapter first presents the conceptual scheme and the research location before elucidating on the methodological and research methods utilised to conduct data collection during the fieldwork period in and around Nepalgunj, Nepal within the period of 24th January 2017 to 4th April 2017.

3.1 Research Questions

The dearth of knowledge that surrounds the practices of child marriage involving child grooms, and their lived experiences motivates the core of the following research questions. This flows into questions targeted at understanding how marital status for child grooms translates into different forms of capital (be it either negative or positive) within the context of a social and cultural environment that supports both pro and anti-child marriage discourses.

Main Research Question:

How and in what ways does early marriage manifest itself in the lives of young grooms, and what is the relationship between (early) marriage and socio-cultural capital in Nepalgunj, Nepal?

Sub-question 1: What are the expected roles and responsibilities for young men and boys prior to, during, and post marriage?

Sub-question 2: What forms of social and cultural capital are accrued (*both negative and positive*) in the process of, and post marriage?

Sub-question 3: How is the capital that is accrued in the process of and post marriage strategically deployed and concealed by young grooms in different spaces of their lives?

3.2 Conceptual Scheme

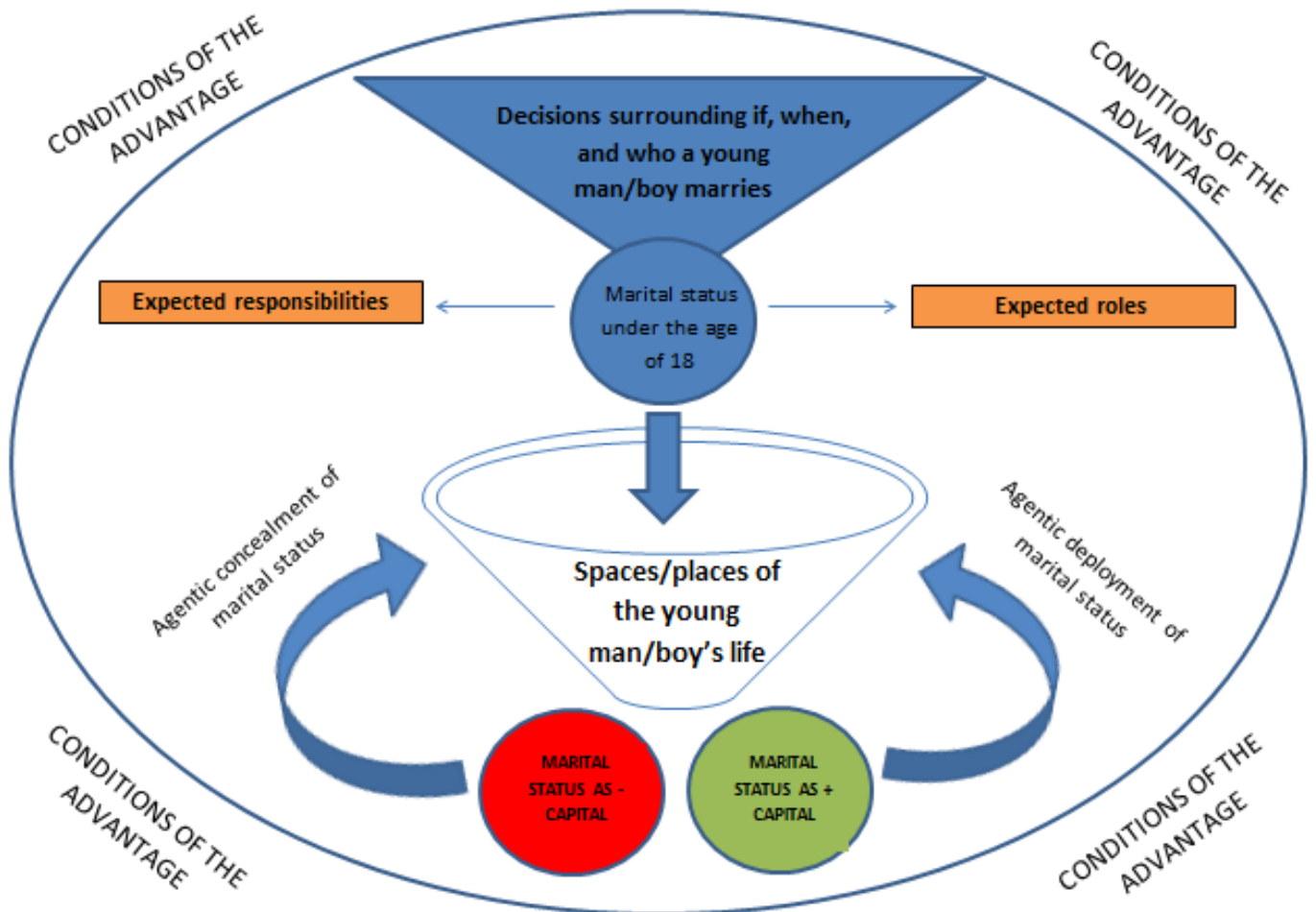


Figure 1: Conceptual Scheme

The conceptual scheme presented above encapsulates the flow of the aforementioned research questions, and how the main concepts from the theoretical framework guiding this study have been applied.

During fieldwork, the notion of approaching a study of early marriage from the perspective of the male (groom or groom-to-be) was a contentious subject – many respondents and organisations did not denote it as a category worth exploring in the first place. Their justification came predominantly from the conception that girls and women carry a disproportionately large burden of the negative aspects of early marriage in comparison to boys who are married before the age of 18. These have been shown to include ‘inadequate socialisation, discontinuation of education, and great physiological and

emotional damage' (UNICEF, 2001:9). Boys are also seen to possess a 'high decision-making capacity and are more involved when plans are made for their future' (*ibid*, 29). A main struggle of my research, and rationalising it, was creating a conceptual scheme and analysis that refrained from arbitrarily comparing effects of early marriage between boys and girls in a superficial and unconstructive manner, but rather accepted that Nepal's patriarchal society does bestow a greater social value to boys than girls. However, the analysis must be pushed further to developing an understanding into *if* and *how* boys who are married at a young age might experience negative (and sometimes positive) life experiences stemming from having their agency surrounding decisions as to if, when and who they marry taken away from them. Therefore, I decided to operationalise Connell's (2005) concept of "conditions of the advantage" as a theoretical membrane in which the rest of the conceptual scheme lay. "Conditions of the advantage" when studying masculinity refers to how male agency can still be moulded by dominant forms of masculinity and the gender order within which it operates, in terms of the expected behaviours and responsibilities surrounding what it means to be a 'good man'. I believe this extra level of conceptualisation is necessary to understand the research as a working whole.

The decisions surrounding if, when, and who a young man/boy marries (in the context of this research hypothesised to be made by parents and grandparents of the groom to be) are the key to what marital status can be attributed to a boy under the age of 18 (married or unmarried). In line with the first sub-question of research, expectations concerning the roles and responsibilities that a boy should assume stem from and are determined by this marital status. The label of 'married' that is attached to the boy's body interacts with the spaces and places in which he lives – and it is through this interaction that being a child groom gains meaning and salience. It was hypothesised that the different spaces in the groom's life either sustain a narrative that either objects to or is hospitable to the notion of early marriage. Therefore, the label 'child groom' either becomes a form of positive capital that allows the groom to access certain resources and legitimise certain behaviours, or negative capital in that it leaves the individual vulnerable to undesirable social repercussions from others. In this way, what it means to be a child groom intersects with space and place. However, it would be wrong to assume that the groom himself does not possess agentic possibilities in either concealing or deploying his marital status as a

means by which to, again, access certain resources and legitimise certain behaviours, or avoid undesirable social repercussions. Therefore, one can consider that grooms (and young men/boys who are also not married) possess a level of agency in manipulating their marital status (be they married or not). The ability for a groom to do this relates back to the pre-existing 'conditions of the advantage' that grant males certain levels of agency and freedom simply because they are male.

3.3 Research Location

A completely landlocked country between China to the North, and India to the East, South, and West, Nepal hosts a burgeoning and ethnically diverse population of 28.5 million (World Bank, 2017). The primary research location for this study was within and in the immediate area surrounding the Nepali city of Nepalgunj, in the sub-metropolitan district of Banke. Located within the Terai Lowlands of mid-Western Nepal, and supporting a population of 491,313 (Government of Nepal National Planning Commission Secretariat, 2011), the area was chosen due to its inclusion as a working area attended to by the Her Choice Nepal Baseline Draft Report 2016 that was submitted by the Centre for Research on Environment, Health, and Population (CREHPA). This particular part of the country was chosen because it harbours some of the highest prevalence of early marriage within its young population at 38%, and has the highest rates of child grooms in any of Her Choice's working areas.



Figure 2: Map of Nepal showing Banke District in red (source: Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Banke_District)



Figure 3: Map of Banke District – (source: ncthakur.itgo.com)

The demographic composition of the area is highly varied, although the dominant ethnic group found in Banke is Muslim (18.9% according to the 2011 Population Census), as well as a large proportion of Chamars (Dalits). Economically and socially marginalised to

varying levels sustained by an illegal, yet socially ingrained caste system that places Chamars and Muslims at the bottom of Nepal’s social standings, the communities within the wards have some of the worst social and economic indicators in the country (Girls Not Brides, 2014; 2015). Concerning employment, these marginalised groups occupy low-paid and low-skilled positions in construction and agriculture within their own community, and within Nepalgunj itself.

There is little to no pre-existing figures that have recorded data ascertaining to the numbers of boys in Nepalgunj and the surrounding communities that were married before the age of 18 and 20, as well as the ages at which males were married. It was beyond the scope of this study to begin to record these figures for future reference, choosing rather to hone in on the lived experiences of those child grooms with whom contact could be made. The most recent available data stating any figures is the Nepal Demographic and Health Survey 2011 (2012), which puts the percentage of boys and men married before the age of 18 across the whole of Nepal at 11%. Additionally, and as seen in Figure 4 below, the Her Choice/CREHPA Baseline Report provides ‘categorical’ data as to the proportion of boys married before 18, ranging from very few to half.

Table 1.3 Early marriage among girls and boys (FGD)

Girls	Banke	
	Treatment	Comparison
<14 years	Few	Majority
14-15 years	Few	
16 - <18 years	Very few	
18-20 years	Very few	One third
Boys		
<14 years	Very few	
14-15 years	Few	One third
16 - <18 years	Half	Very few
18-20 years		

Figure 4: Proportion of Girls and Boys married in Banke within certain age brackets (source: Her Choice/CREHPA Baseline Report, 2016)

3.4 Unit of Analysis and Sampling Method

Prior to leaving for the field, it was difficult to confirm the nature of access in terms of conducting interviews, focus groups, and participatory exercises with boys and men who were married before the age of 18, or are currently married and are under the age of 18. For this reason, I relied heavily on Her Choice's partner organisations CWIN and CREHPA to establish first contact in Nepalgunj³. CWIN's and CREHPA's working partners on the ground, most notably the Muslim Community Development Awareness Centre of Nepal (Nepal Muslim Samaj Bikash Chetana Kendra), would then organise for me to join in their trips to the Village District Communities (VDCs) they operated within. The Muslim Samaj, the most influential NGO dealing with the integration of Muslims into wider Nepali society in the country, chose three VDCs (Udherepur, Hirmanya, and Raniyapur⁴) within close proximity to Nepalgunj itself in which I conducted interviews, focus group discussions, and participatory exercises. Upon arrival, I clearly stated the demographic of respondent with whom I wished to engage, and then the staff of the Muslim Samaj went into the community in a random manner to find men and boys fitting the requirements. Whilst this was arguably the most efficient way for me to overcome access barriers in reaching participants, it did raise questions as to the ethics and validity of this sampling method, especially in terms of intrusiveness and confidentiality. Moreover, at Shree Shaileshowri Vidhya Niketan (Shree Secondary School), the Headmaster was told which kind of students I wished to engage with, and they were brought from their lessons to the meeting and interview room. Students missing class-time for interviews and focus groups was a major concern of this study, and thus I tried to organise individual interviews with participants from focus groups outside of school and working hours so as to not impose upon any more of their daily schedule.

Once in the field, the snowballing effect of finding participants took hold, and I took every opportunity to speak with whoever was available to talk about child marriage

³ An opportunistic focus group discussion was organised with Siddhartha Samudayik Muslim Samaj in Lumbini, a partner of CARE International's Tipping Point Programme in Lumbini, in the Eastern Terai. Although not in the primary research area, there are many demographic similarities with the Nepalgunj area and the practice of early marriage.

⁴ Data is sparse on the population sizes of these VDCs, but 2011 National Population and Housing Census puts Udherepur's total households at 2,149, Hirmanya's at 1,442, and Raniyapur's at 1,128. (source: http://cbs.gov.np/image/data/Population/VDC-Municipality%20in%20detail/57%20Banke_VDCLevelReport.pdf)

amongst young boys and men. Some of the most fruitful interviews came from speaking to religious leaders in the local community, as they are often seen as crucial figureheads for disseminating anti-child marriage rhetoric, and but also are those who are known to officiate such events. With the help of CWIN and my translator, four separate interviews took place:

- The Head Priest at Bageshwori Temple, the main place of Hindu worship in and around Nepalgunj.
- The Head Priest at Gausala Hindu Temple, the secondary place of Hindu worship in Nepalgunj.
- The Vice President of the Madrasa Board in Nepal and Head Mullah in Nepalgunj at the largest Muslim Mosque in Banke District.
- The Founder and Principal of the most pre-eminent Madrasas School in Nepalgunj

Outside of these formal conversations, copious informal discussions took place with individuals that were not necessarily child grooms themselves, had contact with child grooms, or were even involved in social work or NGOs. A particularly interesting group that I attended was Cheers Creative Nepal, a locally run youth group for whom I presented my findings and facilitated debates and discussion around the issues raised throughout my research. All the points of view of the individuals that I came into contact with throughout the research period contributed to my own understandings of Nepali social life and how it is structured in a way that could not have been gleaned on my own. These informal encounters were supplemented by on-going email contact with contacts within CWIN and CREHPA, who were indispensable in explaining the child marriage legal environment in Nepal, and the moves that were being made through its National Child Marriage Strategy.

Having such a breadth and depth of respondents to engage with (see a complete list of respondents in Appendix I) was vital in overcoming access issues, and gave a nuanced and varied set of responses to be used within the research.

3.5 Research Methods

The core objectives of this study were to open up and facilitate discussion surrounding a topic that has only gained nominal attention on the agendas of development

organisations that the respondents may have come into contact with. Therefore, the approach to operationalising my research methods involved first using participatory data collection exercises so as to create an environment in which the facilitator and the participants can reflect and review throughout the encounter. For example, I asked research participants to create what they would view as the 'expected' livelihood timelines for young men and boys, and then using this data as a stimulus for discussion, we would delve into the 'expected' roles, behaviours, and characteristics of young men and boys in their community. This proved extremely productive, as many of the men and boys that I engaged with had never pondered anything to do with issues that affect their demographic to the same extent that they knew girls and women did through development organisations' interventions.

Another reason that I used participatory methods was to confront the subjective nature of childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Unlike many reports from development organisations and academic literature, many individuals do not assign a numerical value to age, but rather entry into certain points of life come from reaching certain life stages, such as puberty or marriage. The participatory methods used let participants present their interpretations of age-related issues.

Five focus groups were conducted with married and unmarried boys and young men over the course of the research period in the VDCs, coupled with two full-day Life Skills sessions with adolescent girls and boys run by CWIN at Shree Secondary School. Although attempting to follow Lewis' (1989) recommendation that there should be between 4-8 participants in a focus group, the random and haphazard nature in the organisation of many discussions upon arrival in the VDCs resulted in focus groups that ranged from 3 people to 12. During these sessions, the participatory data collection methods were employed, alongside semi-structured focus group discussion questions that were linked to the data produced in the aforementioned exercises. The following is a brief description of the methods used and justifications for their usage:

Social Mapping

- Conducted with a mix of young men who had married below the age of 18, married and unmarried boys below the age of 18, and unmarried and married girls below the age of 18.

- The participants drew a visual map of the infrastructure, NGOs, services, decision-makers and influential actors, adolescents, and safe and unsafe spaces in their community.
- Although not *specifically* generating information on early marriage or hegemonic masculinity itself, the maps were later used in interviews and focus group discussions as stimulus for conversation on topics such as which members of the community hold certain views about the practice and masculinity.

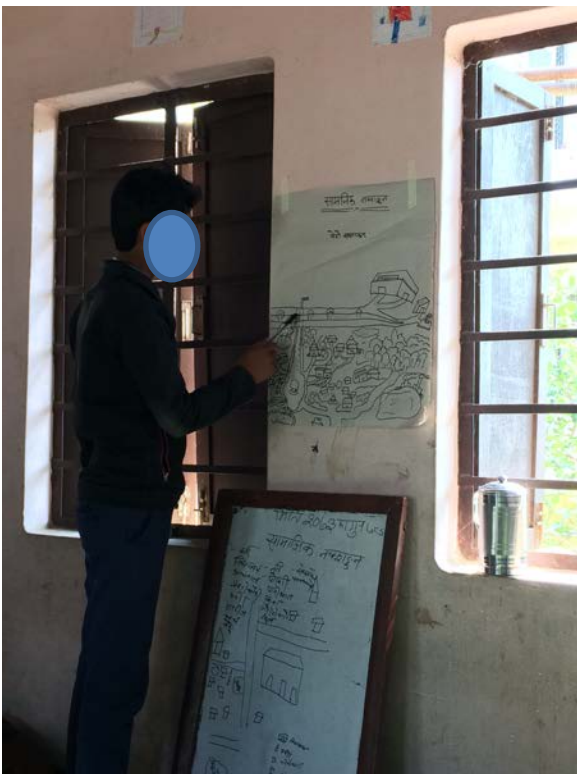


Figure 5: (Left) Unmarried student discussing the social map that he and his group produced during a FGD at Shree Secondary School on 18th February 2017. (Below) The students discussed where early marriage was prevalent in their community by referring to the spaces and buildings they had drawn. They also discussed the views on the practice held by the people that resided in that space. (Photo is researcher's own).



Livelihood Timelines

- As part of a focus group discussion (FGD), participants were asked to create a visual timeline of a typical boy and girl in their communities, and plot onto it major life points from birth through to adulthood (Note - 'adulthood' was defined by participants through this exercise).
- This exercise was an inductive approach to local articulations of the expected roles, behaviours, and relationships that denote what it means to be a 'man' and a 'woman' in the researched communities.
- The subsequent part of the exercise was for participants to compare and contrast what they had written with their peers and/or other family members.

- Through this, points of agreement and contention surrounding masculinity and expectations came to the fore, and discussion was facilitated where applicable.

Risk and Benefits Mapping: benefits/risks of getting married before and after 18

- This tool was used as a way of understanding key stakeholders’ understandings of what they see as the benefits and risks of early marriage on boys (note – this exercise was employed with religious leaders)
- This exercise was vital in creating an environment for reflecting and reviewing the topics being addressed, and opened up a fascinating discussion between married and unmarried participants of varying ages.

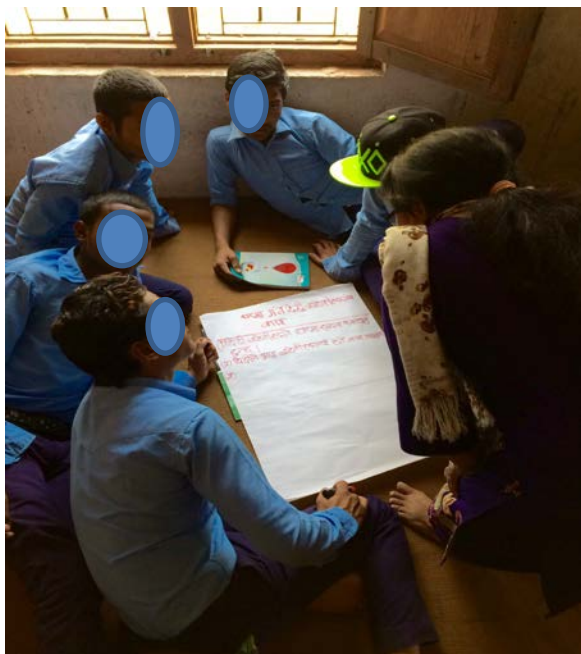


Figure 6: 2 married and 3 unmarried male students discuss the risk and benefits of getting married before and after the age of 18. The dynamics of discussion between married/unmarried participants were an intriguing part of the research, particularly for understanding the meaning the label ‘child groom’ gained in settings that carried an ‘anti-early marriage’ rhetoric like this CWIN Life Skills session on 20th February 2017 (Photo is researcher’s own).

Although practicalities such as time, space, and number of participants hindered the smooth roll-out of these participatory exercises in every focus group, at least one was employed each time, acting as a ‘warmer exercise’ and stimulus for semi-structured focus group questions.

From the initial focus groups and their associated participatory data collection exercises, boys who were currently under the age of 18 and married, as well as young men who were over the age of 18 but married below the age of 18 were approached for in-depth interviews. The interviews during field visits to the Muslim Samaj’s VDCs were conducted in

the privacy of the local health outpost, although there were occasions when this was not possible, and the participants took myself and my translator to an area that they deemed private enough for the conversation to take place. The interviews with married boys at Shree Secondary School were scheduled for out of school and work hours in a nearby hotel's meeting room. The organisation of the interviews did not involve any member of staff at the school, and was kept private between myself and my translator. Attempting to conduct any research in a quiet and private setting at the school was impossible, and thus the decision was made to change the environment completely and to remove the interviewees away from any influence from their peers. The interviews themselves varied in length, from 30 minutes to 1h30.

Bearing in mind the hypothesised potential pitfalls concerning the reluctance of women to engage with a male researcher and translator, it was deemed sensible to work in conjunction with my fellow female researchers, Claire Thomson and Kianna Dewart, to conduct all of the interviews and most of the focus groups with participants of the same sex. Although we did not attempt to conduct these interactions with members of the opposite sex, reflecting on our choice to structure our data collection in this way, we were able to avoid any hypothesised difficulties in male-female interaction and engaged with many more research participants than we would have otherwise.

3.6 Data Analysis

Due to the recordings of interviews and focus group discussions, as well as the material produced in participatory exercises being solely in the Nepali language, I was completely reliant on my translator to transcribe and translate the data into English. Because this was an extensive task, we took time at the end of every working day to review and compare notes. This was particularly useful because he could elaborate on some of the topics and issues that were raised throughout the sessions but he could not tell me in the midst of the session. Moreover, it allowed me the opportunity to note the emerging trends and codes in responses, so as to better inform the following session of data collection. Using anecdotes and quotes from previous interviews anonymously so as to stimulate discussion in subsequent interviews and focus groups was a key tenet of my research.

After having returned from the field, I received the transcribed and translated interviews from my translator and I was able to cross-reference and add more substance and evidence to the already established preliminary codes and themes. The interviews and focus groups were coded on paper with colour referencing, and key quotations brought together thematically to define the structure of the following empirical chapters. Additionally, field note diaries and government reports were used to triangulate the data. The reason for this two-tiered approach to data analysis was that the initial inductive approach allowed for openness, adaptability, and flexibility to new ideas in the field, and the subsequent deductive stage developed these engagements whilst placing them in relation to wider literature.

3.7 Ethical Considerations and Limitations

Contradicting initial suppositions, those involved in the research had an overwhelmingly positive attitude to engaging with the questions and exercises within the study. The willingness and enthusiasm of many of the men and boys to talk about their own experiences and issues was noticeable. Indeed, many thanked me for allowing them the platform upon which to discuss their lives.

One of the most intriguing ethical considerations and limitations of the study was the way in which respondents approached the 'illegality' of their situation if they were married below the age of 18 in the context of engaging with a Western researcher and our partner NGOs. Because of the illegal practice of under-age marriage that many of the participants were voluntarily or forcibly involved in alongside their families, written and verbal consent were taken for every participant prior to any data collection exercise, and respondents were continuously assured of their voluntary participation and confidentiality of the information they provided. However, when many participants were informed of the purpose of the study, and the fact that it was being used by CWIN and Her Choice to better understand marriage in their community and also what it means to be a man, any reservations about the repercussions of recounting their stories disappeared. Only on one occasion (to be elaborated on in the second Empirical Chapter) did an under-18 married boy remove himself from the research encounter with me and my translator. At a later date, it transpired from a close friend of the boy that he had left because he was scared that his

illegal marital status would reach his peers at school and potentially the local authorities and CWIN. This situation reiterated the vulnerability of young men and boys in the study, and also the potentially extremely sensitive nature of the topics being discussed.

One of the main limitations of this research was the language barrier, and what was arguably 'lost in translation'. All of the data collection was conducted in Nepali, and thus I relied exclusively on my translator to fully understand my lines of questioning and what I wished to get out of the research encounter. Luckily, being a social worker himself, and familiar with many of the terms such as 'gender equality' and 'masculinity', my translator became synchronised with my research aims. The process of translation was challenging, however, and when reading the translated transcripts, it was obviously difficult for my translator to provide a conceptually accurate translation of the sentences and meanings that the participant(s) wished to convey.

3.8 Concluding Remarks

The preceding chapter is a research framework that has been built from the existing literature and the gaps within it concerning the lived experiences of child grooms. The research questions and the subsequent conceptual scheme synthesise and operationalise the main tenets of the study's theoretical framework. Additionally, the structure of the data collection methods addresses the fact that this topic area is arguably not one that has been dealt with in the working areas before by either researchers or local NGOs. The initial participatory exercises created stimulus for the following focus group discussions, and laid the groundwork for respondents to reflect upon aspects of their lives about which they or others may not have engaged (such as male issues or what it means to be a man in their community). The individual interviews were facilitated by the respondents having had prior interaction with me and the topic areas of the questions. The following chapters present the empirical findings emanating from these engagements, firstly attending to how the lived experiences of married young men and boys warrant deeper engagements with the effects of child marriage, and secondly how marital status can be a form of negative and social capital for both married and unmarried boys in their communities.

4):“There is no such thing as a forced marriage, as a child always has the right to refuse”

(Founder & Principal, Nepalgunj Madrasas School)

Introduction

Defining ‘child marriage’ is a contentious and complex task, and although international organisations work with a broad sweeping definition along the lines of ‘a formal marriage or informal union before age 18’ (UNICEF, 2014), this study acknowledges that within this explanation there are a myriad of specificities in the actual understandings of marriage and its process that vary within and between individuals, communities, and countries. For example, the Gender Equality Act of Nepal establishes the age of marriage without parental consent at 20 years old, but 18 with parental consent. Variances such as these, especially working in the context of communities who do not necessarily measure readiness to marry by numerical ages, prove the difficulties in defining ‘child marriage’. The following chapter will explain the extent to which the lived realities of child grooms in and around Nepalgunj, warrant the deeper nuancing of child marriage and what it entails.

4.1 Saadhi, Gauna, and Effective Marriage

When engaging with young male research participants in and around Nepalgunj, questions surrounding how the responsibilities and roles of a male who is married before the age of 18 differ before and after marriage became a clear entrée for understanding how early marriage *actually* impacts upon their lives.

A way of unpacking the intricacies and specificities of ‘early marriage’ in this research was to look at the expected and actual levels of responsibility, types of roles, and expected behaviours that are anticipated of a boy who is married before the age of 18; in other words, how do these aspects transition and change before and after marriage? Before diving into analysis, it is necessary to understand the practicalities and the temporality of the process of marriage that typifies those social groups that practise child marriage in and around Nepalgunj. When one speaks of ‘child grooms’, and as many of the publications cited

in the Introductory chapter of this research paper explain, one envisages boys automatically assuming the 'traditional' husbandry roles that include becoming a father and being tasked with wage-earning responsibilities for his new wife and family. Indeed, this conceptualisation has unequivocally steered the (few) engagements that there have been with 'child grooms' in CARE (2016) and UNICEF (2001). However, this research can claim to shed light on a more nuanced and complicated story in the lives of 'married' boys. As has been mentioned, what would officially be known as 'child marriage' in the context of the global community was exclusively found by this research to be practised amongst the Madhesi community in and around Nepalgunj. Of the 11 individual interviews and amongst the 5 focus groups conducted over the 9 week research period, every research participant who had been married before the age of 18 belonged to the Madhesi community⁵.

As the research progressed, informal and opportunistic interviews shed light on the fact that speaking from a numerical age-standpoint, Madhesi boys were married at a noticeably younger age than their non-Madhesi Hindu peers. Consulting the age-range data collected from the research, the age at marriage amongst Madhesi males spread from 15 to 22 years old, with an average of 18 years old (See Figure 7). Due to time and resource limitations of the research, the focus of engagement was kept to married Madhesi boys. This decision was taken after the evidence grew that they were the population in which 'child grooms' occurred most frequently. Once it became apparent that the age of marriage for males in non-Madhesi communities living in the study's working areas was above the age of 18, it became clear that to better answer the research questions, it was necessary to narrow the scope of this research to Madhesi communities only.

⁵ See Contextual Chapter 3.3 for an explanation of Madhesi culture and practices

Pseudonym	Current Age	Age at Marriage	Length of Saadhi	Age at Gauna
Chetan	24	18	6 years	23
Lokesh	20	17	3 years	20
Bibek	27	19	3 years	21
Gyan	20	19	1 year	20
Ravi	18	16	n/a (5-8 years)	n/a
Krishna	17	15	n/a (5 years)	n/a
Amit	23	21	1 year	22
Anand	23	20	1 year	21
Bandi	24	22	2 years	22
Kartick	24	18	2 years	20
Gagan	18	18	n/a	n/a

Figure 7: Table to show the ages at the time of specific marriage practices amongst respondents (please note that this data pertaining to larger, opportunistic focus groups that included boys and men married below the age of 18 was not able to collected due to the lively nature of the environment)

Approaching the concept of ‘child grooms’ from a mere numerical age standpoint, as development organisations continue to do, masks specificities in the marital process that have significant bearing on the lives of adolescent grooms in the Madhesi community. *Saadhi* and *gauna*, form two crucial Madhesi marital practices, which are explained in detail to the right and below (Ghosh, 2011).

Madhesi Marriage Rituals:
“Gauna marks the moment when the bride goes to live with her husband and in-laws. This practice is common in communities where children are married prior to puberty; the gauna often takes place after the child reaches puberty. However, in these situations, the first ceremony is not an engagement – it is a marriage, and can be as difficult to dissolve as any other marriage”
 Source: “Our Time to Sing and Play – Child Marriage in Nepal”, Human Rights Watch, September 7th 2016,
<https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/09/07/our-time-sing-and-play/child-marriage-nepal>

‘Saadhi and gauna’

When Madhesi boys confirmed their age at marriage during research sessions they were referring to the age at which they had their official marriage ceremony (this ranged from 15-22 years of age - see Figure 7). During this ceremony, the customary marital rituals of the Madhesi people are performed, and the bride and groom are officially married. However,

this does not denote the commencement of conjugal life, by which the bride moves to the groom's family home. Instead, each remains in their own family home and the interim period between official marriage ceremony and cohabitation begins, named *saadhi*. As my research into the lived realities of 'child grooms' progressed, this time frame became a focal point of analysis. The length of *saadhi*, varying from 1 to 8 years (see Figure 7) and its termination, hinged on a decision made by the head of the groom's household as to when they required the assistance of the bride within the house. The decision was also made based on an estimation of whether she and her husband were physically and emotionally ready to assume the roles and responsibilities of conjugal life. As Bandi, a Madhesi Muslim man who was married at the age of 18 stated:

"it (gauna) happened when my parents decided we were at a sufficient age for marriage"

(FGD, Raniyapur VDC)

Both the male and female caregivers are here denoted as heads of the household, and have the decision-making power concerning when *gauna* occurs. At this point, the bride is physically brought from her family home to her husband's home by male members of his household. This is referred to by Sethi *et al* (1988) as the commencement of 'effective marriage', as typical roles and responsibilities associated with marital and conjugal life are assumed.

It is vital to remember this succession of ritualised markers typifying the practice of Madhesi marriage going forward through the analysis and discussion of child grooms. However, what these practices denote in terms of their effects on the lives of child grooms in the research communities would not have stimulated as much further analysis had it not been for comments made about child grooms by a Programme Coordinator at Child Workers in Nepal (CWIN) on Tuesday 31st January 2017:

"there isn't a need or a desire for young men to disclose their marital status as it is not an issue."

This quote raised more questions than answers for the research, and highlighted the need to uncover in what ways marriage does and/or does not have a bearing on the lives of married boys and when it is deemed worthy or unworthy of discussion by different actors in

society. Similarly to the rhetoric presented in the aforementioned UNICEF and CARE documents that give nominal attention to the experiences of child grooms, the quotation highlights a belief that expectations of, and behaviours and roles required of, a married boy do not require personal upheaval on the part of the young man. Additionally, it does not place constraints on agency and freedom on young married men. The quote thus speaks to the broader consensus that married girls are the primary ‘victims’ of patriarchal systems, with the ‘plight’ of young men not requiring particular attention.

As highlighted by the excerpt from a focus group discussion with five unmarried boys (16-19 years), respondents put little emphasis on marriage as a barrier to pursuing their dreams in relation to educational pursuits and earning money:

Facilitator: *“Would being married now at your age change your dreams?”*

All: *No, no, no.*

Facilitator: *Why?*

Raja: *It wouldn’t stop me because even if I am married I am still able to go to college and earn money for me and my family. I would still be able to do lots of the things I do now even if I was married now. It is not important for me reaching my dreams.*

Facilitator: *Is this the same for girls in your community?*

Jawahar: *No! When girls are married early they are sometimes stopped from education, and they have to sit quietly in class, but boys have the freedom to work and study” (FGD, Shree Secondary School).*

It was unclear whether Raja was referring to his hypothetical life during the period of *saadhi* or what he imagined conjugal life to be like. Regardless, his observations echo the Programme Coordinator at CWIN’s comments as to marriage not having much bearing on the lives of boys. Raja and Jawahar’s recognition of the differing repercussions of marriage for boys and girls in his community is also of note. The seemingly unconstrained mobility and choice that married boys have according to Raja and Jawahar is juxtaposed with the stories of discontinuation of education, curtailment of freedoms, and subjugation that came

from focus groups with the female peers of these boys at the same school. In subsequent interviews and focus groups, I further encouraged married and unmarried male participants to reflect on the real and imagined responsibilities for them and changes in their lives before and after marriage, which proved a fruitful exercise. For example, a body mapping exercise at the same school with a mix of married and unmarried boys (15-19 years) yielded important insights into this topic. During the activity, the boys noticeably struggled to write down different roles and responsibilities between the unmarried and married figures on the board, with one *married* participant stating:

Ravi (18 years, Madhesi Muslim): *I don't know how they [roles and responsibilities] are different...*

The fact that this response came from an already married boy is salient, and must be contextualised in the aforementioned description of the Madhesi marital practices of *saadhi* and *gauna*. At the time of the study, Ravi - who was married at the age of 16 – was still residing in the interim marital period of *saadhi*, and *gauna* would occur anytime in the next 8 years, according to him. Thus, it is difficult to say whether Ravi's inability to explain the roles and responsibilities before and after marriage is because he has not *assumed* any new roles (fatherhood, for example) because he does not yet physically live with his spouse, or because these roles were not significantly different from those that he already had before marriage.

Eventually Ravi's peer stated that they should add 'fatherhood' to the list, and my translator explained that the other boys in his group laughed together at why they had not thought of this at the beginning of the exercise. The roles and responsibilities that the young men *did* state during this exercise yielded rich data, particularly because there were no different responses between the answers provided by young men taking part during body mapping exercises at the Shree Secondary School, Udherepur VDC, and with CARE Nepal:

Before marriage: Studying; independence; wage-earning; mediator in inter-family conflicts

*After marriage: Studying; independence; working; wage-earning; mediator in inter-family conflicts; **fatherhood***

(results of all-male focus group conducting a body-mapping exercise)

The reason why these responses are significant for the research is that, despite the age span of those involved in the exercises (the youngest was 11 with CARE Nepal and the oldest 50 in Udherepur VDC) and that they lived in different communities, the ideas concerning marriage's roles and responsibilities before and after marriage are strikingly similar. Not only did the body-mapping exercise shed light on the expectations that men and boys feel are required of them in the study communities across a large time frame, but also that marriage as a ritualised marker of entry into manhood would bring minimal practical changes to their lives beyond (potentially) fatherhood. The noticeable outliers in these body mapping exercises came from FGDs conducted in Hirmanya and Raniyapur VDCs. Hirmanya's focus group involved 10 males from the ages of 14-28, of which those aged 20, 24, 27, and 28 were married and living with their wives. The currently married young men had their official marriage ceremony at the ages of 17, 18, 19, and 19 respectively, the first of which would be considered a child marriage according to the UNCRC while the marriages of the three remaining young men would be regarded as child marriage according to Nepal legislation (only if the parents had not consented to it). In a lively and interactive focus group discussion, the married males honed in on the responsibilities and duties that a married man had towards his wife. The young men drew a clear difference concerning how roles and responsibilities change before and after marriage:

Lokesh (20, married): *"We have said that we have to first fulfil the needs of our wives, like clothes and jewellery when we are married. (Laughing) But sometimes she also needs sex.*

Facilitator: *Did you write anything about your wife's health?*

Lokesh: *We wrote that when she has her period we have to do the cooking and provide her water for bathing.*

Facilitator: *So these are roles and responsibilities that you didn't have before you were married? How did you feel when you had to do them when you were first married?*

Bibek (27, married): *In our culture, we practise gauna and thauna, and so I think I was more mature about these things when my wife came to my house than when if I had to do these things when I was their age (points and laughs at younger boys in FGD)".*

In this part of discussion, Lokesh relates that the group of men and boys have decided that in addition to studying, independence, working, wage-earning, being a mediator in inter-family conflicts, and fatherhood as the roles and responsibilities that a groom must assume after marriage, they must meet certain needs and desires of their wives. This group was the only group to explicitly mention their spouse in response to the roles and responsibilities assumed after marriage, which one can hypothesise demonstrates a more advanced and engaged level of connection between husbands and wives in their community. However, and arguably most interesting for this research, were Bibek's comments on when these roles and responsibilities manifest themselves in the lives of married men. Due to the practice of *gauna*, the point in their lives at which they were 'required' to actually initiate these roles and responsibilities comes at a point not when they are 'children', but more mature, knowledgeable, and responsible.

Comments such as this further reinforce the messy realities of engaging with 'child marriage' amongst boys in this research context and when referring to it in wider policy, as marriage only appears to have significant bearing on the lives of grooms until their 'effective' cohabitation, which happens significantly later than the date of official marriage. Reflecting on the opinions of men who were living with their wives provoked a consideration for how and in what ways Ravi (officially married but not living with his spouse) may have answered differently after *gauna* occurred.

The FGD conducted in Raniyapur VDC with three Muslim Madhesi married men aged 23 (married at 21), 23 (married at 18), and 24 (married at 20), as well as a Hindu Madhesi married man aged 24 (married at 22) yielded similarly intriguing insights into how early marriage shapes the life choices and actions of men and boys. It is worth noting that at the time of the study all the men in this focus group were currently living with their wives in their parental home. When pressed on the ways in which their lives would have been different if they weren't married at the ages they were, the men brainstormed on paper that they would have *had more freedom, been able to take any job, go abroad, not have family pressuring us to give them money, and not become a father*. Expanding on this in response to the difficulties that they faced within marriage, the men centred on wage earning roles and expectations, of which the following three quotes as illustrative:

Anand (23 years old): *“The biggest difficulties we have are to earn money for our wives. If we cannot earn enough money then we lose the support of our families. Sometimes I cannot share the money between my wife and family, and there are arguments.*

Amit (23 years old): *I also find it hard to supply my children with clothes and money for school.*

Anand: *I do not want to go to a foreign country for work, but now I am being forced by my family. I love my wife and children so much that I will do it so that my son or daughter can go to school”.*

In an informal discussion that was not recorded after the focus group, Anand and Amit went on to explain that in their community, at least one man from each family goes abroad to either Qatar, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, UAE, or Kuwait to work for around 2-3 years⁶. The men explained that men who go abroad for work after they have started conjugal life went for shorter periods (1-2 years) than men who went abroad before their official marriage or *gauna* (4 years). The men explained that this disparity in time was attributed to the fact that men that live with their wives carry a pressure to be physically present in their family as a *“guardian of the family and mediator, and do common responsibilities like child-raising”* (Anand, informal discussion). However, at the same time, the same men considered working abroad away from their family as the best way of earning more money more quickly and overcoming many of the difficulties in their conjugal lives attributed to wage-earning and financial provisions. The pressure to remain and the pressure to work abroad created a paradoxical and frustrating situation for these men between being physically absent and earning more money to support their family than they would have if they stayed in their community, and being physically present to support their family and earning comparatively less.

From the previous analysis, the interview question ‘How do the expected roles and responsibilities differ for child grooms before and after marriage?’, actually required a deep understanding of the intricacies and time-frames associated with the marriage process in the Madhesi communities. It became clear that for those boys who were married but had

⁶ 520,000 labour permits were issued to Nepalis planning to work abroad in 2014 across these destinations (source: <http://ilo.org/kathmandu/areasofwork/labour-migration/lang--en/index.htm>)

not started conjugal life, there was little to no difference, but for those who were living with their spouse (but above the age of 18), the roles and responsibilities surrounding particularly wage-earning expectations, begin to come to the fore. Indeed, as Goswami (2007: 130) postulates, 'in many instances such post-marriage institutions take place during the legal age at marriage'.

4.2 Child Groom agency in deciding if, when, and whom he marries

The preceding analysis has attended to the bearing that early marriage has on the lives of men and boys in and around Nepalgunj. It has highlighted that often the supposed roles and responsibilities that can be perceived as being detrimental to the psychological, social, and physical development of young males do not come into play until significantly later than their "official marriage ceremony", which would denote the boy as married. At this point, it would be easy to give this analysis to the 'nominal attention to child grooms' rhetoric employed by UNICEF documents. However, Connell's notion of 'conditions of the advantage', which plays a significant guiding role in this research, has steered me to probe the stance that men and boys who were married at a young age had on the decision-making power that they held in the process of deciding if, when, and who they married. The perceived and lived realities of the roles and responsibilities aside, these participants expressed near universal acknowledgement that they had always wanted to get married at some point in their lives, but they were not necessarily married to whom they had wanted or married when they had wanted.

So as to contextualise the following analysis, I will employ a comment made by my translator after individual interviews carried out with married boys from Shree Secondary School in Nepalgunj on 24th February 2017. We had just heard the testimonies of the boys who had their official marriage ceremonies at the age of 15 and 16, and were contemplating the technicalities of the marriage process, and the decision-making power and input that young boys and men have. As mentioned in the Introduction of this paper, there are conflicting reports about the levels of agency that boys exercise in terms of deciding if, when, and who they marry (UNICEF, 2001; Her Choice, 2016; CARE, 2016). My translator related to me that despite what international organisations may claim, boys that he had

engaged with as a social worker who were married early were *'bound in a circle of customs and religion.'* Thus when it comes to making their own decisions about marriage he explained that decision and choices as to if, when, and whom a young man/boy marries do not stem from an individual choice, but are instead geared to placating familial wishes in line with customary practices. Surendra's anecdote acted as an effective conversation starter, and the idea of constrained agency provoked heated debate when it was highlighted in interviews and FGDs. For example, when pressed on the concept of individual choice relating to if, when, and whom a young man/boy married in their community, The Vice President of the Madrasa Board in Nepal and Head Mullah in Nepalgunj explained in an in-depth interview that:

"It is the fault of the boy himself if he gets married when he is young. He is aware of the effects on his wellbeing and also the law."

Similarly, during an interview with the Hindu priest at the Gausala Temple in Nepalgunj, the sentiment was expressed that:

"If a young man and a young woman don't want to marry then they make their own choice and use their voice."

At a pre-eminent Madrasas School in Nepalgunj, the Founder and Principal related that:

"There is no such thing as a forced marriage, as a child always has the right to refuse marriage, and they are weak if [they do] not. The boys who were married that you speak of were manipulated by their family and grandparents."

These religious leaders, who are individuals of notable standing in their communities and often play an officiating role in marriage ceremonies, are seen to share the view that boys and young men that are to be married have considerable agentic power in challenging decisions made for them concerning their marriage. Yet, their interviews were riddled with contradictions on this point, in particular when the aforementioned comments are considered against the backdrop of the same participants' accounts of responsibilities that young people had towards their parents and grandparents, who are the key decision-making powers in marital affairs. For example, the Hindu Head Priest at Bageshwori Temple in Nepalgunj, the largest in the research area, explained that:

“The characteristics of a good man/woman are that they respect their parents as God, follow the rules, religions, and caste inherited by their ancestors, only marry with the person fixed by their parents, accept decisions made by their parents without arguing, and respect all elders.”

The Head Priest at Gausala Hindu Temple in Nepalgunj expressed similarly that:

“A young man and a young woman cannot make the decision for the marriage because they respect their parents. Sometimes, in the family, if someone is close to death they want to see their son or daughter married, then people will marry for their family.”

In comments such as these, the sense of communality, subservience, and respect for family wishes in communities that practise child marriage involved in this study are palpable, and are arguably reflective of beliefs of wider Nepali culture. Comparing and contrasting the beliefs of these religious leaders, it appears that even if a young boy wished to disobey the wishes of his family concerning if, when, and whom he married, it would be a move severely incompatible with ingrained religious and cultural values. These postulations about agency, family duty, and decision-making power gain further salience when put side by side with those made by boys who were themselves married at a young age.

A ‘desire to respect family wishes for them to be married’ was the unanimous sentiment expressed by the 11 boys with whom I interviewed individually when responding to the question, ‘Why did you get married at the age you did?’. There are a range of direct quotations that exemplify this point, but the one that best encapsulates the broader sentiment was made by Krishna – an 18 year old boy Madhesi Muslim, who was married at the age of 16:

“I wanted to marry at the age of 25, but I faced the pressures of my house and family to marry at 16. My grandfather said to me one day that he wants to marry so that he can have a peaceful afterlife. He said he cannot pass to Heaven if I am not married. I said to him that he was only thinking about his happiness not mine, but what can I do? I cannot disrespect my family, so I am now married. I am not satisfied in my marriage as I didn’t have the chance to decide who and when I married.” (Individual interview)

Ravi's sentiments reflect accounts made by many of the other men and boys that were married young regarding customary constraints (such as those surrounding death rites) on young men's decision-making power as to if, when, and whom they marry. Ravi's remarks are, furthermore, indicative of how a lack of connection and potential animosity towards one's spouse can arise from having one's agency taken away in deciding if, when, and whom one marries. Ravi's lived reality adds another, more nuanced layer to the previous discussion concerning the small, if insignificant changes that some married men and boys felt comes with marriage. Although the immediate bearing on the lives of married boys and men did not seem to be quickly or deeply felt (partly to do with the practice of *saadhi* and *gauna*), the curtailment of agency early in the life of a boy and the possible curtailment of future life choices in decisive formative years is arguably a significant area for concern. But what was clear from talking to respondents was that the incentives for accepting a marriage arrangement made by their family were larger than the disincentives for not accepting it.

4.3 Concluding Remarks

The overarching goal of the first empirical chapter of this study was to show that defining child marriage involving child grooms, the particularities of the process of marriage, and the bearings that it has on the lived realities of young men and boys who are married before the age of 18 are intricate and nuanced. For example, due to the existence of *saadhi* and *gauna*, there is often a substantial time gap between when a boy is officially married and when he enters into his 'effective marriage'. During *saadhi*, the expected roles and responsibilities surrounding conjugal life are not apparent in the lives of the young grooms, and only come into play after *gauna* (and often when the young man is either above the legal age of marriage in Nepal or international law). Although the bearing that early marriage has on the lives of child grooms is not as tangible as perhaps first imagined, the study has highlighted that child grooms lack in decision-making power and agency when deciding if, when, and whom they marry. The notion of 'choice' is contradictory, as key decision-makers in influencing if, when, and whom a boy marries state that the groom *does* possess free choice in the process surrounding marriage, whereas the grooms themselves relate that this is in fact a constrained choice influenced by the wishes of their family and elders.

The following chapter will delve into the incentives for marriage, and particularly how marital status for young grooms can be a form of positive social capital in their lives that they can manipulate to access certain resources. Additionally, it will be analysed how marital status can also be viewed in particular ways by family and community, and be a way of legitimising certain behaviours. At the same time, it will be shown that agentic power still rests with child grooms when they face environments that are hostile to the notion of early marriage, in the sense that they strategically can conceal this aspect of their identity. This ability is linked to the 'conditions of the advantage' of the male position in society, and will also be tackled in the next chapter.

5): “If they said why are you having sex, I would say why did you marry me?” - **Marriage as Social Capital**

Introduction

The following chapter will analyse how the label of marital status for boys and men, particularly those married at a young age, acts as a form of both negative and positive social capital in their lives, gaining meaning and value in differing spaces and places. The fluidity and precarity of capital will be shown, especially how changes to tastes and trends surrounding the acceptance of early marriage in the study area shape the value of marital status as capital. However, the label of married or unmarried does not work in a vacuum, and the agentic possibilities of young men and boys to strategically deploy or conceal their marital status as either a safeguarding mechanism or as a means by which to gain access to resources and legitimise certain behaviours will be presented as a key characteristic of social life for both married and unmarried males. This chapter will include a deeper ethnographic engagement with two married boys under the age of 18 who related particularly telling stories about their lives.

5.1 Early Marriage as Positive Social Capital

5.1.1 Centrality of Marriage in Society

Throughout the study areas, early marriage was framed as a form of positive social capital for boys and young men who had been married at an early age in a variety of ways. As considered in the previous empirical chapter, the specificities of the marriage process (such as *saadhi* and *gauna*) amongst boys and men who were married at a young age are the lens through which the following analysis will be approached. Those that fall into the category of ‘child groom’ often do not have agency in deciding if, when, and with whom they are married, and due to an overwhelming pressure not to rebel against the wishes of those in their family for them to marry, subsequently enter into the union. Yet, this desire to be respectful and align with the decisions made by others in their family is not the end of

the story. The prestige that all respondents gave to the institution of marriage in their community also goes a long way to explaining why many young boys and men follow down this path at an early age.

As has been mentioned before, it is not a question as to 'if' boys and men want to marry. Indeed, every male participant that the study engaged with over the course of the research period expressed a desire to marry at some point in their lives. However, it was not necessarily at the age they are at now or were at when they married:

Facilitator: *"Does everyone want to get married at some point, or do some people not want to get married?"*

All: *We want to get married, yes.*

Facilitator: *And why do you want to get married?*

Sandeep (17 year old unmarried boy): *To please our parents, but also because you cannot become a real man if you are not married, I think". (All-male focus group at Shree Secondary School)*

Sandeep's belief in the centrality of marriage to becoming a man was indicative of all research participants across the study areas. Indeed, ranking exercises repeatedly placed marriage as the most important means by which a boy can enter into manhood in the eyes of himself and his community. In response to 'How can a boy become a man?', participants across the five focus groups that were conducted with a mix of married and unmarried boys and men unanimously agreed that marriage was the most important, followed by sex, children, work, and fulfilling needs of the wife. Also of note is how participants mentioned 'fulfilling needs of the wife' as being of less importance than actually having the label of 'being married'. This common thread of thought affirms the place of marriage as a ritualised marker of entry into manhood that serves to affirm one's place in society, whilst simultaneously demoting the responsibilities, duties, and expectations of a married life. This idea of marriage as social structuring will be engaged with later in the chapter, in the sense that although boys and men are shown to manipulate the process of marriage, they do not deny its importance or centrality in society as an institution.

Based on responses to questions posed to participants about living with the label of 'being married' in their communities, the way in which being married not only trumped other forms of social and cultural capital, but actually gave meaning and salience to them arose as an important concept. Using Bourdieusian language, examples of other social and cultural capital did not become positive currency unless the individual was married. An anecdote by Bibek (27, Madhesi, married at 19) exemplifies this point:

Facilitator: *“So if someone has a good education (Bachelor’s etc) but he is not married, can he become a man?”*

Bibek: *“Even if someone has a Bachelor’s degree in Commerce and success in business, he cannot become a man without marriage. With marriage he will see himself as a man and so will his community.”*

Bibek here describes his personal opinions and those on wider societal notions of how marriage is a gateway to 'becoming a man', and how the process and ritual of becoming a man comes from others seeing you as such. Moreover, he consolidates the idea that unless aligned with marriage and being a married man, other forms of social capital, like educational attainment, are nuanced.

The idea of marriage for a man as being a 'status achieved' was common throughout the research. The concepts of status and social standing were particularly apparent in the responses of men who had been married at a young age and had already had *gauna*:

Kartick (24 years old, married at 18): *“Before my marriage, if my mother gave me ten rupees to go and buy vegetables that cost 8 rupees, she would not trust me that I would bring back the two rupees difference. But now that I am married and have responsibilities and must earn money for my family, she trusts me.”*

For Kartick, his family and community changed their view of him upon becoming married from one of distrust and scrutiny to trust and respect. Marriage was undoubtedly one of the most salient forms of social currency that the participants described.

Linking marriage as positive social capital back to the ideas of agency in the previous chapter, the point being made here is that even if the young man or boy has little or no

agency in deciding if, when, or whom he marries, ultimately the social dividends that he reaps from his marital status in the eyes of others make him a 'man' and more socially accepted than he would have been unmarried. This also serves to support the claim that the question concerning the lived realities of child grooms is not as concerned with 'if' a man gets married, but more aligned with 'when' and with 'whom'. However, whilst the preceding conversation has focused on the institution of marriage at large, and the ways in which it facilitated entry into manhood in the eyes of participants and their wider social circles, nuances occur when specifically engaging with the idea of *early* marriage. Early marriage and being married early is not a form of capital that migrates cleanly between different social and cultural contexts for the boys and young men in this study.

5.1.2 Legitimising sexual and health seeking behaviours

During field visits to the working areas of the Muslim Samaj, I conducted interviews with staff nurses and health assistants concerning the services and outreach that they offered males in their communities. None of the health outposts could give clarity on the extent to which counselling, family planning, and training was aimed at any group other than women. However, a recent publication by Mattebo *et al* (2016), titled *Perceptions of the role of the man in family planning, during pregnancy and childbirth: a qualitative study with fifteen Nepali men*, had peaked my interest in the ways in which men saw it as their responsibility to obtain and their decision to use a condom. I therefore asked the question 'For what reasons do married and unmarried boys come to the health post?'. The health assistants unanimously agreed that married and unmarried boys only come for free condoms, and have little or no relationship with the health outpost beyond that. The fact that both married and unmarried boys came for condoms, in a society that scorns extra-marital sex was of particular interest here. When I sought more clarification on what happens when an unmarried boy comes into the health post, the assistants explained that on average, he is 16 years old, and when he comes into the clinic he often states that he is married:

"Many of the boys come in knowing to say that they are married, when we know they are not. We give them condoms anyway because it is a free service." **(Male Health Post Worker in Hirmanya VDC)**

This situation affirms the idea that for many of the boys seeking condoms (regardless of whether they are actually using them or not for sexual intercourse), being a sexually active male is not socially sanctioned and/or permitted without the label of 'being married'. The health post worker explaining that the boys '*come in knowing to say that they are married*' suggests that the boys themselves realise this social norm. It also suggests that they are thus freely and strategically manipulating their marital status so as to gain access to resources to which they believe they would be unentitled if they were unmarried. The idea that marital status legitimises these health-seeking and sexual behaviours gains even more meaning when considering that Madhesi culture forbids contact of any form between a bride and groom until *gauna*.

When these anecdotes from the health post workers were used during focus group discussions there was often giggling and a shying away from engaging with the discussion amongst the younger married and unmarried boys. My translator subsequently explained that in Madhesi Muslim culture, the repercussions for boys if they are found to have condoms on their person whether married or unmarried are severe, as his understanding was that the Koran explicitly states sex for pleasure outside of marriage is banned. This did appear to be confirmed by the Head of Muslim Religious Leaders in Nepalgunj and the Vice President of Madrasas in Nepal, who related that condoms should only be used to '*space births*'.

5.2 "If they said why are you having sex, I would say why did you marry me?" - An ethnographic engagement with Ravi

As mentioned in the first empirical chapter, Ravi Chowdry is an 18 year old Madhesi Muslim who attends Shree Secondary School in Nepalgunj. He is currently in *saadhi*, and he believes the commencement of conjugal life, or *gauna*, will not come for another five to eight years. During an hour and a half interview, Ravi spoke of a range of issues relating to how marriage at an early age impacts on his life and his decisions now and for the future.

Ravi explained that he currently has two girlfriends at Shree Secondary school. The girls do not know about each other, but do both know that he has a wife who lives in a nearby VDC. He related to me and my translator that he has had penetrative sex with one of his girlfriends and engaged in non-penetrative sexual relations with his wife in his uncle's

house. Bearing in mind the negativity surrounding extra-marital affairs and relations between groom and bride until *gauna* had occurred in Madhesi culture, I wanted to understand what Ravi believed were the possible repercussions of his actions:

Facilitator: *“What would happen if your family knew about your affairs and that you were seeing your wife, when you said that “sex before marriage is illegal”?”*

Ravi: *“If they said why are you having sex, I would say why did you marry me?”*

In this particular instance, Ravi has made the lack of choice and decision-making power that he had in the marriage process a legitimiser of his sexual behaviour and his response to his parents. Ravi’s undermining of social norms and socially sanctioned behaviours so as to exercise *his* interpretation of his sexual entitlements can be taken as a means by which to regain, retain and mobilise a certain level of agency and freedom that his account seemed to suggest was lost during his arranged marriage.

This notion of legitimacy filtered into Ravi’s responses to what he would do if his wife became pregnant:

Facilitator: *“What would happen if your wife or girlfriend became pregnant?”*

Ravi: *“If my wife became pregnant then I would consult with the doctor – it is my right as I’m married.”*

Facilitator: *“What would happen if your wife became pregnant and you wanted to keep the baby?”*

Ravi: *“At that time I would consult with my family, and then bring her to my house for *gauna* immediately.”*

In this sequence of questions, Ravi clearly demonstrates his view of his marital status as a positive form of capital that allows him to access services and resources that he would arguably have trouble accessing if he was not married. The assuredness with which he described his consultation with the doctor as a *‘right’* reinforces the idea that although he may not have wanted to be married, Ravi understands and strategically manipulates the situation in which he finds himself in line with wider socially sanctioned norms around

marriage, sex and health-seeking behaviour in Nepali culture. The impression from engaging with Ravi on this subject was that he would wear his marital status in these situations as a 'badge of honour', not as a burden. The possible outcomes of the risky sexual behaviours that Ravi engages in appear to be diluted in severity by the fact that *gauna* can be brought forward. In other words, the rituals of the marriage process can be manipulated so as to avoid any negative repercussions (such as judgement from the wider community) for Ravi, his wife, or the family. The fluidity and flexibility with which Ravi approaches the possible negativities of being married early in his life are underpinned by a level of agency and decision-making power that is in direct contrast to his previous exclusion in deciding if, when, and who he married.

The idea of fluidity and flexibility was further consolidated when Ravi was pressed on what would happen if his wife had a boyfriend, and engaged in similar sexual behaviours as him:

Ravi: *"I will leave her and keep her in her own house. If my family and I don't know about her affair, we can't do anything. Before and after my marriage, if she has a boyfriend, then I will tell my parents to secure my life and let me leave my wife, because my family has arranged my marriage with her, so that's their responsibility."*

Apart from exposing the innate inequalities in how married boys and girls would be treated in such a situation, Ravi also touches upon another issue that I believe also underpins his behaviours before *gauna*. The phrase '*that's their responsibility*', firmly puts responsibility for his and his wife's actions in the hands of his parents. This deflected responsibility is arguably another form of agency that Ravi is delegating, as he is distancing himself from handling any negative repercussions associated with marriage because, in his view, he was not part of the arrangements and decision-making process. Ravi's attempts to maximise the benefits and cut his losses shows a tactical manipulation of the marriage process (in terms of timing, ritual, and duty), whilst still conforming to the centrality of marriage and obeying the wishes of parents as discussed in the previous chapter.

It is worth noting that similar questions that were posed in an individual interview with Krishna, a peer of Ravi's at Shree Secondary School, generated very different

responses. Currently in *saadhi*, Krishna described the complete lack of contact that he has with his wife:

Krishna: *“After marriage I will see her, but I can’t take her to my home for 8 years, so if in this time period I have romance or feelings or love for her then it won’t matter for me as I cannot see her. But when she will come to me and I will see her, I will do love, I will do romance with her, but now if I did it would be not ok.”*

It is interesting to draw comparisons between Ravi and Krishna’s points of view, especially because they come from the very similar cultural and socio-economic backgrounds.

Whereas Ravi is seen to be consciously playing with the boundaries of what is socially acceptable behaviour for a groom, Krishna appears to respect the purpose of the *saadhi* interim period that comes before conjugal life and does not try to actively manipulate it.

Both boys have seemingly accepted their marriage in light of the wishes of members of their family, but have very different ways of understanding the label of ‘married’ that they have been given.

Marriage as a legitimiser of sexual relations continued...:

As an addition to Ravi and Krishna’s experiences, it is useful to further relate their actions and comments to the views of others involved in the study. A revealing discussion ensued with young men and boys in Udherepur VDC during an informal focus group, in which the participants recounted the desire to get married for the purpose of starting and raising a family. However, following further conversation, many expanded by saying the desire was also due to men and boys being socially excluded from their communities for having pre and extra-marital sex. For example, one young man in the focus group told the story of his brother who had sex with a girl in their VDC who then became pregnant just before his leaving for migrant-labour in Malaysia. When the families discovered that she was pregnant, to avoid hearsay or judgement she was moved into his family home, and the brother is to marry her when he returns from Malaysia. In this example, as with the boys seeking condoms, and Krishna and Ravi, socially-sanctioned sex is seen to only come from being in marriage, but marriage itself can also be a form of fluid social capital that can be manipulated by the grooms and their families to legitimise certain relations and avoid conflict.

5.3 Marriage as negative social capital

Both unmarried and married respondents posited a range of positive social dividends that early marriage has for them and others in particular contexts. The positivity centred on marriage permitting entry to manhood, gaining respect from others, and legitimising certain behaviours and access to resources. However, broadening the scope of analysis, early marriage was viewed by many unmarried and already married respondents as a negative form of social capital that brought hardships in particular contexts.

Nowhere was the notion of early marriage as negative social capital more apparent than in spaces that carried a markedly 'anti-child marriage' rhetoric, of which school settings and NGO organisations were the most prominent in this study. Whilst the discourse these particular spaces harboured was to be expected before heading to the field, the ways in which those young boys and men who were married at an early age traversed and interacted with these anti-child marriage spaces, became a key line of inquiry for this study. One of the most salient examples of this interaction was during an attempted interview with a 17 year-old Madhesi boy at Shree Secondary School. After having interviewed two other boys under the age of 18 who were married and attending the school, the Headmaster brought the last of his 'married' male students into the interview room. However, as the interview started, it quickly became apparent from the boy's body language and responses that he was incredibly uncomfortable with the research encounter. My translator explained to me that the boy was proclaiming adamantly that he was not married, and that his friends and Headmaster had been lying about his marital status. I therefore decided to terminate the interview, reassured the boy that none of his details or words had been recorded, and he left the interview room with no further issue. Confused about what had just occurred, we re-entered the staff room and asked the teachers present about why the boy had acted the way he did:

Headmaster: *"I don't know why he wouldn't want to talk to you. Everyone in the community knows that he is married so I don't know why he would hide it."*

The episode proved to be a particularly useful scenario to present to subsequent married and unmarried male focus groups. During a focus group discussion with 16 Madhesi boys

(11-16 years old) arranged by CARE Nepal at a community centre in Lumbini, the group considered this example:

Facilitator: *“Why do you think the boy did not want to talk with me about being married?”*

Boy 4 (15 years old, unmarried): *I think it is because he is afraid of bullying and teasing from other students at school. I feel sorry for him because his parents don’t understand the effect it [being married early] will have on his life.*

Facilitator: *Does this happen to boys who are married early in your community?*

Boy 15 (13 years old, unmarried): *No boy is married early in our community as we all know the bad things about it, but if I was married now I would be scared how society will judge me and my family.*

Boy 12 (16 years old, unmarried): *I think I would say that his family is uneducated with bad culture.”*

This passage of discussion encapsulates the ways in which the label of ‘child groom’ gains meaning, and is simultaneously valued and de-valued across time and space. Firstly, Boy 4 explains the overarching reason why the married boy at Shree Secondary School might have refrained from talking to me. In his view, being married as a boy is a label that leaves the individual open to ridicule because it is associated ‘with bad culture’. Boy 15 places the reason for this in the fact that ‘we all know the bad things about it’, seemingly referring to the targeted efforts of the NGOs, law enforcement, and schools that present the negative aspects of child marriage to these youngsters and their families. It is telling that this group of boys have had regular interaction over the last few years with the Siddhartha Samudayik Muslim Samaj in Lumbini, a partner of CARE International’s Tipping Point Programme (mentioned in the Introduction). This project ‘focuses on facilitating and learning from innovative strategies to influence change-makers and roots causes of child marriage’, and particularly working with young boys on gender equality and their rights as children (CARE, 2016). The boys in the focus group, despite their age, were extremely vocal and aware about the perceived negative effects of being married early, and the judgement they would face in wider society.

The sentiments of the respondents in the discussions moved between empathy (*I feel sorry for him*) and minimal compassion (*his family are uneducated with bad culture*). However, although it is clear that the environment in which these boys socialise and live is hostile to the practice of child marriage, the respondents do not place the blame and responsibility for boys being married early with the boys themselves, but rather with their family (*his parents don't understand the effect it will have on his life; his family are uneducated with bad culture*). Similarly to Ravi who puts full responsibility with his parents and grandparents for the nature of his marriage and the choices that were made for him concerning if, when, and whom he married, the boys in this focus group alleviated blame from the boy himself to other family members. The connection made between these responses further consolidates the notion that boys married early see themselves as having little to no agency in the marriage process, but also that those of a similar age and unmarried see it and understand it too. In this sense, the boys saw the label of being married as form of negative social capital attached to child grooms in their community that would expose the grooms to teasing and bullying, but also recognised that ultimately the decision to get married at an early age was not the groom's choice.

This idea is in direct contrast to those expressed by all of the religious leaders who took part in this study. As described in Chapter 4, all religious leaders involved in the study stressed the inexistence of 'forced' marriage and the free will and choice possessed by boys to refuse early marriage (*it is the fault of the boy himself if he gets married when he is young* - The Vice President of the Madrasa Board in Nepal and Head Mullah in Nepalgunj). What is clearly evident from the spectrum of responses generated around the topic of what being married early as a boy means in one's community, is that there is a significant hostility towards all of those engaged in the practice. This ranges from the boy himself to his parents and grandparents. To what extent animosity can be attributed solely to the work of organisations that deliver an anti-child marriage message is beyond the scope of this study, but the fact remains that these sentiments exist and different opinions are held by different actors within the spaces constituting the life of a married boy.

Whilst the aforementioned focus group discussion that occurred in Lumbini produced a wealth of insight into how early marital status is valued, all those involved were unmarried. Some of the most fascinating dynamics came from focus groups that included a

mix of both married and unmarried males, especially in the school environment. Nowhere was the relationship between unmarried and married individuals more apparent than during the CWIN-run Boys Life Skills sessions at Shree Secondary School. Taught chronologically over three days, the sessions were: My World; Habits; Adolescence; Needs and Desires; Rights and Responsibilities; Differences between Boys and Girls; Gender Equality. The content of these themes was consistently related back to the rights that children had under Nepali and International law, which were made explicit from the beginning. The swiftness with which the issue of child marriage arose was noted (within the first 15 minutes on the first day), as was the language used to frame the rights that the boys had in relation to it:

CWIN Facilitator: *“It is your child right not to be married before the age of 18 in government legislation. With your guardian’s permission, you can get married after 18 and before 20 years old.”*

The conversation following this centred on the ‘*risk of death and mental disorders*’ (CWIN facilitator) that could occur amongst boys married before the age of 18, before branching off into a general discussion about reaching their dreams and the struggles that stood in their way. The vast majority of the 23 boys (including 2 currently married, one stated as married by the Headmaster but argued that he was not, and one who had his official marriage ceremony the following week) cited higher education and earning money overseas as their primary goals. The openness and communal nature of the discussion was particularly evident when each boy took their turn to tell the group their desired career and the obstacles that they needed to overcome to get to it. When it came to Krishna’s moment to speak, I was fascinated to see how he would broach the subject of how his marital status may or may not impact upon his livelihood choices. Not only had I heard respondents from other focus groups saying married boys at school tended to be teased, but Krishna was also currently embedded in an environment that framed his marital status and decisions made by his parents *for* him as illegal and damaging to his wellbeing.

Krishna: *“I want to be a painter, but my goal will be made harder because I have to earn more money to fulfil my wife’s needs like clothes and food. If she wants to study, I will help her study. If a baby comes we will need even more money.”*

Krishna's honesty seemed to strike a chord with the rest of the group, who did not laugh or tease him. Rather, they listened intently to his words and the conversation was passed to the next member of the group to describe their goals. Krishna's decision to lay bare to those present (his peers and NGO workers who are actively involved in reporting cases of child marriage to law enforcement) did not appear to be calculated or to provoke a particular reaction, but instead was a frank interpretation of how he saw his early marriage impacting his life. After the Life Skills session, I engaged in an opportunistic conversation with Krishna, and I asked him about how he felt being in an environment where his peers and NGO workers knew that he was illegally married, and where he was being told that his current situation was a violation of his child rights:

Krishna: *"I said before it is my grandparents' wish to see me married before they die so that they can go to heaven. So what can I do even if I know my child rights? At the moment I do not see my wife so it does not affect me, but I think about what will be in the future."*

Krishna's words tie together the previously discussed sense of unwavering duty that child grooms have towards obeying their family's wishes in a domestic setting, and not rebelling against this even though they are immersed in environments such as the Life Skills session that present a discourse to them that problematises their current and future livelihoods. This encounter with Krishna encapsulated the argument that the label of being a child groom and married gains certain types of meaning depending on what social and cultural setting the individual finds themselves. Krishna succinctly describes what can be seen as the variability and unstableness of marriage as a form of social capital for young men and boys in different settings.

5.4 Concluding Remarks

The goal of this second empirical chapter was to portray how the label of marriage gains positive and/or negative value when it comes to exist in different social spaces. The overwhelming centrality of marriage as an institution in Nepali culture, with its purpose of unifying families and creating the conditions for family lineage to continue, is a ritualised entry point by which a boy can become a man. In this sense, many respondents who were married at an early age saw the issue of marriage not to be a question of 'if' they would marry, but rather 'with whom' and 'when'. Having the label of marriage is a form of positive

social capital as it allows one to be seen as a man by those in the community. It also, in the case of those such as Ravi, was manipulated as a means by which to legitimise certain health-seeking and sexual behaviours in line with wider socially sanctioned behavioural norms. Re-imagining and playing with marriage as a form of positive social capital, there were respondents who were managing to cut their losses and retain some of the agency and decision-making power lost throughout the marriage process.

Young men and boys also entered into spaces and interacted with individuals and groups that were opposed to early marriage and framed it as a negative form of social capital. This took the form of judgements based on lack of culture or poor education levels, and in some cases bullying and teasing. One respondent chose to strategically conceal his marital status to avoid any potential difficulties, whereas others accepted their situation even though they were aware of the risks of exposing the illegality of decisions made by their family.

Having presented the empirical findings of this study, the following chapter will place them within a broader theoretical base. Following on from this, recommendations will be given as to how to better address child grooms in projects and programmes aimed at building child marriage free communities. Further areas for research on this topic will also be discussed.

6). Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of following through with this study was to shed light on a more nuanced and complicated story concerning the lived experiences of men and boys who were married at a young age in Nepal, so as to inform future projects that target building child marriage-free communities across the world. The research is supported by a gender-relational research framework, and combined with work by Raewyn Connell concerning masculinity and 'the conditions of the advantage'. Connell's stance is used to show that men and boys live with notions of constrained agency and are pushed towards expected behaviours and responsibilities associated with fulfilling hegemonic masculine ideals, often from conflicting sources.

This chapter will provide an answer to the study's main research question, as well as working the study's theoretical framework into dialogue with the empirical data. Tentative policy recommendations concerning how to engage men and boys in interventions that seek to build child marriage-free communities will be posited, with a view to moving beyond the conflation of gender-development-women.

6.1 Answer to Main Research Question:

How and in what ways does early marriage manifest itself in the lives of young grooms, and what is the relationship between (early) marriage and social capital in Nepalgunj, Nepal?

Drawing upon the work of Connell, marriage in this study is a tangible means by which the abstract, superficial, and often unobtainable notion of hegemonic masculinity can be consolidated. It affirms a hetero-sexual gender identity that is in line with these hegemonic masculine ideals, and simultaneously allows the individual to progress to the status of 'a good man', which itself was found to be a murky and contradictory concept in the study area. Current understandings of early marriage give little to no attention to the 'process' of achieving this status, mainly because early marriage is almost unequivocally imagined in development interventions as being between an older man and a younger girl. The power differentials and notions of oppression and privilege are evident in this 'older man-young girl' marital configuration, but it is not within the scope of answering this study's

main research question to analyse them. However, when one considers, as has been presented in the empirical findings of this study, that early marriage in a number of communities around the world is structured as the (formal or informal) union of a young man and young woman, the power inequalities and how they manifest themselves become more telling.

Firstly, this research sought to better understand what bearing being married at an early age has on a young groom in terms of the changes it brought to his life. To gain insight into this, it was first necessary to truly understand the specificities of the *process* of marriage in communities that involve girls and boys entering into unions at a young age. For boys who are married at a young age in and around Nepalgunj, early marriage first manifests itself at a time in their lives when they are in their early teenage years. The decision-making power as to if, when, and whom the young boy marries resides with the heads of the groom's household (mainly parents and grandparents). Therefore, from this study's findings, one can conclude that a young boy who is to be married has little to no agency in deciding the timing of his marriage, whom he marries, and even if he marries. This lack of agency does not sit cleanly with traditional notions of male privilege within early marriage, which have been configured around the concept of an *older* man entering into the union with a younger female. Male oppression and constraint of agency in this way hits right at the heart of this study's theoretical foundation. McIntosh's (1991) ideas of the 'invisible knapsack' of male privilege is here being brought into dialogue with Connell's notions of 'the conditions of the advantage' of male privilege. Even though this research took place in a society that generally bestows a higher value to the male body, the fact that there are young men and boys who are having a decision about their futures and livelihood choices taken away from them, forces us to accept that male privilege is not universal. Instead, male privilege is relational, and experienced alongside oppression in different contexts and to varying levels by different males related to variables such as age and socio-economic status. As was highlighted by boys and young men who were married before the age of 18 in this research, the head of the household was always seen to exercise power over the choices surrounding the son's marriage within the family setting, but the son himself had considerable agentic possibilities relating to strategically concealing and deploying his marital status outside of it. This latter point was particularly poignant when compared to

the inhibited agency of a young married girl in being sexually active and accessing contraception without wider repercussions and judgement from those around her.

For young men and boys living with the label of 'early marriage', how they experienced oppression and privilege related to how they navigated the incentives and disincentives of being married at a young age in the particular settings they frequented in their daily lives. For example, all eleven boys and young men who were married before the age of 18 in this study stated that their wish to not deny the desire of their grandparents to see them married before they die was an overwhelming reason for the boys carrying through with the marriage process. The religious leaders engaged with in this study approached this sentiment held by the married boys in a condescending manner, stating that the married boys always have full agency in deciding if, when, and whom they marry, and are not bound to fulfilling the wishes of anyone but themselves. However, it is clear that early marriage is not a process or a decision that is tied to the two individuals who are to be joined in the union, but rather intersects with wider understandings of what it means to be a man, and religious traditions and beliefs.

It is therefore not a simple matter of talking about the 'disincentives' for getting married at a young age when the male involved himself has little to no agency in deciding if, when, and to whom he is married. Rather, it is the disincentives for rebelling against the wishes of one's family and community for refusing marriage at that particular time and with that particular person. Going along with the wishes of one's family trumps the disincentives of having to carry the label of 'married man' in environments that were evidently hostile to early marriage as a practice, and included individuals and groups who were judgemental of those involved in early marriage. The notion of how the label acted as a negative form of social capital in particular settings, notably school and NGO child rights sessions, was a salient part of the research and how early marriage manifests itself in the lives of young grooms. The negativity was such because being married at a young age attracted the threat of or real criticism and judgement from non-married peers in the form of bullying and teasing. For some respondents this forced them to fully conceal their marital status as a means of self-protection. As has been repeatedly shown throughout this study, the label of 'early' marriage is a form of capital that does not move neatly between the spaces with

which a young groom interacts, be they either hostile or welcoming to the concept of early marriage.

Broadening this idea of how the 'early' marriage label does not migrate cleanly between and within different social contexts, the research considered how those who were married were aware of the meaning and value that their marital status would acquire in particular settings (as either a form of positive or negative social capital). This awareness was shown through the concepts of child grooms strategically concealing and strategically deploying their marital status. It presents an additional layer to Connell's notion of 'conditions of the advantage', because in testimonies such as Ravi's (18 year old Madhesi Muslim engaged in sexual relations with his wife before she has moved into his family home), even though the agentic power to decide if, when, and whom one marries had been removed from him, the young groom demonstrated an ability to manipulate his marital status as a means to either protect himself from harm, access resources, or legitimise certain behaviours. The most notable examples of a strategic deployment of agentic possibilities came around behaviours and actions related to sex, in which being a married man somehow 'gave permission' to accessing contraceptives and having sexual relations with a partner in a way that it would not be for an unmarried boy or man. This whole process of concealment and deployment based on whether the label of early marriage is seen as a form of positive or negative social capital in a particular setting can be viewed as a way in which young men and boys are clawing back an amount of agency that they have had stripped from them when the decision for them to marry was made by their elders. To what extent girl brides possess the same ability to manipulate their marital status in a similar way to the grooms interviewed is beyond the scope of this study. However, this research strongly suggests that the girl bride would feel notably more severe repercussions of engaging in similar behaviours as described by the married boys (such as asking for condoms and/or extra-marital relations).

In essence, the ways in which early marriage manifests itself in the lives of young grooms appear to be through how the label of 'married man' gains meaning depending on the social setting in which the individual finds himself. This 'meaning' relates to the label either being a form of positive social capital in environments that are conducive to the

practice of early marriage and welcome it, or a negative form of social capital in spaces that carry a distinctly anti-early marriage rhetoric.

6.2 Discussion

The very notion of shedding light on the lived experiences of a numerically inferior study group within the broad practice of early marriage is not as obvious a one to justify as arguably child brides. However, this research has shown that there is still much work to be done to fully understand how the lives of those young males who have been forced to enter into an informal or formal union with a similarly young female are affected by such a practice. Although the fact that *saadhi* and *gauna* potentially delay the onset of the expected responsibilities and roles that are associated with being a married man living with his wife until early adulthood, this does not belittle the fact that a boy has had his agency and decision-making power removed from a situation that will have a profound bearing on his livelihood choices and opportunities in later life. In light of this, it no longer makes sense to fully hone efforts to build “child marriage-free communities” exclusively onto girls and women who are married early. Boys and young men are evidently, albeit it in particular communities across the world, susceptible to the practice and live with its repercussions.

Studies concerning the ways in which boys and young men experience early marriage becomes all the more relevant when considering how the label of ‘being married’ at an early age gains meaning and value within particular spaces, which were most notably for this research the schools and NGO's that are delivering an ever-increasingly hostile anti-child marriage rhetoric. It must not be forgotten that although the number of boys married before the age of 18 is comparatively small to their female counterparts, these males still must interact with manifestations of anti-child marriage discourses on a daily basis. This could be in the form of fear of potential or actual bullying and teasing from peers, an issue that gains particular salience in the important developmental years of a young boy who is married. The broader relevance of this argument relates to the ethics of development interventions, and how current projects may negate the fact that they are dealing with individuals who have been, often against their will, burdened with the label relating to the harmful social practice that the intervention is actually trying to stop. In the context of this research, it was the fact that boys who were married below the age of 18 were sitting in

sessions run by development organisations alongside their peers who were not susceptible to early marriage, and being told that it was illegal and a violation of their rights as children to be married at the age they are. Where does this leave boys and young men who have, as has been shown in this study, been stripped of their agency and decision-making power surrounding their marriage due to family pressures and expectations that have coerced them into accepting their early marriage? Whilst “building child marriage-free communities” is accepted as serving the interests of communities as a whole, more needs to be done to consider the tensions and repercussions of working with vulnerable individuals such as the child grooms and brides themselves. The fear of one’s family or oneself being in some way punished for engaging in early marriage practices is not to be overlooked in development interventions.

However, although this study has shown married boys to be acutely aware of the negative aspects of early marriage, they are also aware that the repercussions of not complying can be severe. Pressure and responsibilities to placate the wishes of family members through early marriage was a consistent and sustained response by participants, stressing that it is impossible to attribute decisions surrounding if, when, and whom a young boy marries completely to the groom’s individual choice. Whilst married boys themselves expressed this pressure, there was a noticeable disjuncture with religious leaders and unmarried youngsters in the same communities, who would scorn the inability of married boys to stand up for themselves and convince their family of the negative repercussions of early marriage. Unpacking Connell’s ‘conditions of the advantage’, one can see a double standard here in which boys are on the one hand under pressure from their families to enter into manhood and prove their virility through marriage, and on the other under pressure from other actors to demonstrate their manhood by challenging calls for them to be married early. This point further consolidates the jarring and crisis tendency of hegemonic masculinity, its contradictions and fragile nature, by portraying differing kinds of ‘good man’.

From a project intervention perspective, addressing the wider family pressures to be married should be a particular target for future projects and policy that focus on building child-marriage free communities. Moreover, policymakers should acknowledge that, as this study has shown from engagements with religious leaders and youngsters, there actually is

a wider societal belief that boys *do* have the capacity to rationally convince their elders to not force them into marriage in the first place (see Chapter 4). Whilst such a belief works from a standpoint that males are comparatively more privileged and valued than girls, it can target young boys and men as change-makers in their own society (Mathewson, 2009). The blossoming of this was seen during the focus group discussion in Lumbini, during which the young male respondents engaged in a heated debate around the negative aspects of early marriage in relation to a robust knowledge of their rights as children to not be married. To what extent concerted efforts with children translate into changing hearts and minds amongst those who have been shown by this study to hold the decision-making power in the marriage process remains to be seen, and is a route for future research.

This study has shown that the issue to be tackled does not centre on eliminating marriage as a social practice. Indeed, it is a vital social structuring and ordering mechanism within and between families and communities. However, the overwhelming desire from the youngsters engaged in the study was to gain a greater level of agency in deciding *when* and *with whom* they were married. Therefore, it is not a question of *if* an individual will marry, as the majority did want to, but rather the timing and with who.

Supporting boys who are susceptible to early marriage to exercise their right to not be married at an early age is even more important when one considers that they themselves are numerically a minority in environments that are deemed hostile to early marriage, such as in the Child Rights Sessions run by CWIN at Shree Secondary School. As has also been highlighted in this study, there is the possibility that they are exposed to bullying and ‘teasing’ in such settings. The wellbeing of a young, married individual, who is sitting in a classroom being told that their situation as a married child is illegal and that their family is breaking the law is not to be understated, and future projects and interventions must be aware of how best to engage with them.

Additionally, future research ought to more thoroughly look at the prevalence of early marriage amongst young men and boys based on a variety of variables that might separate them from their unmarried counterparts. Although all marriages involving child grooms were found to be in the Madhesi communities in and around Nepalgunj, examining variances within these groups based on household income and family configurations would

produce a wider picture of the factors that prompt the practice of early marriage in particular families. It may also give projects aimed at building child marriage-free communities entry points for interventions.

6.3 Relevance for Gender Work

It is also worth reflecting on the implications that this study posits for gender work more generally, particularly in terms of gender's relational nature, social justice, and gender equality. The main impetus behind conducting this research was that negating the lived experiences of a demographic within a social practice that is naturally intertwined with gendered norms and hierarchies of masculinities and femininities will always handicap interventions and projects that aim to bring about social justice and gender equality. Far too often the male experience, and how masculinity is experienced by individuals and groups (both male and female) is tentatively shunned in policy and practice agendas for fear of belittling the female experience, the inequities they face, or taking away already sought after funds and resources from women's issues. Certainly, the reviews conducted before and during this study into what denoted 'male inclusion' in development interventions, revealed an emphasis on how the male gender has to *give* something to the female development agenda. However, this research has raised some important points in light of this anxiety and pigeon-holing of males in development and gender:

Men and boys undeniably warrant an understanding as a demographic group in their own right. Men and boys are themselves living in relation to abstract and rigid socially constructed norms and expectations concerning the attitudes and behaviours of a 'man'. Whilst these norms do often lead men to reap the dividends of being male and create disparities with women, they can also burden males with significant pressures and challenges that directly affect their (and others') wellbeing. Engaging with child grooms as a study population has shown that there is an ongoing lack of comprehension concerning the social constructs that systematically oppress and privilege men in certain social settings, as well as how not all males benefit from the gender system at large everywhere and all the time. To homogenise the female or male experience denies intra and inter-gender inequalities (such as older men over younger boys) and the vulnerability of certain groups to harmful social practices depending on certain identity variables.

6.4 Summary of Policy Recommendations and Research Agenda

To summarise the future research agenda and policy recommendations in the preceding text:

- Broaden the scope of understanding within ‘early marriage’ to include configurations of informal and formal unions between young boys and young girls. There is a dearth of research into how child grooms live with the label of ‘early marriage’, particularly along variables such as age, ethnicity, and socio-economic status.
- Conduct thorough research into the actualities of the marriage processes that involve child grooms. These specificities (in this study *saadhi* and *gauna*) directly affect what the responsibilities, roles, and expectations relating to marriage are, and at what point in the marriage process they are assumed by the groom himself.
- In light of the lack of agency that child grooms possess in challenging decisions as to if, when, and with whom they are married, projects and programmes must more sensitively approach how to relay information around the rights of a child to those youngsters who are already involved in early marriage and cannot simply challenge it in their own lives.
 - This point is particularly salient when programmes involve a group of married and unmarried individuals, as there is evidence of teasing and bullying of the former group by the latter in such settings.
- Interventions must also focus on how to aid child grooms in approaching key decision-makers in their household with their rights as a child. It is not simply a matter of relaying information about rights, but how to support vulnerable youngsters in exercising these rights.
- Interventions must fully engage with these key-decision makers, who are often the parents and grandparents in the household. The research has shown these individuals to bestow the pressure and expectation on young men and boys to marry early.

6.5 Concluding Remarks

Despite the fact that 'child grooms' are a statistically inferior demographic group to all others currently dealt with in research and policy surrounding child marriage, this study has provided important data showing the complex lived realities of boys and young men who are married before the age of 18 in a specific community. This study harbours wider themes related to masculinity that are relevant for social research, particularly the crisis and contradictory tendencies of masculinity and what it means to be a man. Moreover, and using the label of early marriage as an example, the research has shown how certain identity markers gain meaning and value in differing settings and become either a form of negative or positive social capital to the individual. There is still much research to be done on the place of men and boys within early marriage, and particularly how they can be better engaged to end this harmful social practice and build child-marriage free communities; it is hoped that this research provides a stimulus for such action.

7). Bibliography

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8). Appendices

I. List of Respondents/Transparency Report

Number	Name	Age	Sex	Religion	Marital Status	Activity/ Date/ Place
1	Deepak Chemjong (Principal of Shree Secondary School)	-	M	-	Married	Multiple Informal Conversations on many Dates at Shree Secondary School, Nepalgunj
2	Saddam (Health Assistant at Udherepur health post)	-	M	Muslim	-	In-depth Interview, February 9, 2017, Udherepur VDC Health Post
3	15 men (Udherepur VDC residents) <i>NB: the open and unstructured nature of the encounter made it impossible to document participants.</i>	10 – 50	M	Muslim (Madhesi)	Mix of married and unmarried	Informal FGD, February 9, 2017 Udherepur VDC
4	Aadi (pseudonym)	17	M	Hindu	Unmarried	Focus Group Discussion February 14 & 15, 2017 Shree Secondary School
5	Madhev (pseudonym)	17	M	Hindu	Unmarried	Focus Group Discussion February 14 & 15, 2017 Shree Secondary School
6	Raja (pseudonym)	19	M	Hindu	Unmarried	Focus Group Discussion February 14 & 15, 2017 Shree Secondary School
7	Gagan (pseudonym)	18	M	Hindu	Unmarried	Focus Group Discussion February 14 & 15, 2017 Shree Secondary School

8	Jawahar (pseudonym)	16	M	Hindu	Unmarried	Focus Group Discussion February 14 & 15, 2017 Shree Secondary School
9	Baladitya (pseudonym)	18	M	Hindu	Unmarried	Focus Group Discussion February 14 & 15, 2017 Shree Secondary School
10	Prapti (pseudonym)	17	F	Hindu	Unmarried	Focus Group Discussion February 14, 2017 Shree Secondary School
11	Mrinal (pseudonym)	15	F	Hindu	Unmarried	Focus Group Discussion February 14, 2017 Shree Secondary School
12	Samata (pseudonym)	18	F	Hindu	Unmarried	Focus Group Discussion February 14, 2017 Shree Secondary School
13	Basanti (pseudonym)	16	F	Muslim	Unmarried	Focus Group Discussion February 14, 2017 Shree Secondary School
14	Shakantula (pseudonym)	18	F	Hindu	Unmarried	Focus Group Discussion February 14, 2017 Shree Secondary School
15	Madhu (pseudonym)	15	F	Hindu	Unmarried	Focus Group Discussion February 14, 2017 Shree Secondary School
16	Rita (pseudonym)	15	F	Hindu	Unmarried	Focus Group Discussion February 14, 2017 Shree Secondary School
17	Rupali (pseudonym)	15	F	Hindu	Unmarried	Focus Group Discussion February 14, 2017 Shree Secondary School
18	Adla (pseudonym)	15	F	Muslim	Unmarried	Focus Group Discussion February 14, 2017 Shree Secondary School
19	Sakuntala Dhobi	14	F	Hindu	Married (married at 10)	In-depth Interview February 14, 2017 Shree Secondary School
20	Kalpana Budha	22	F	Buddhist	Married (married at 16)	In-depth Interview February 14, 2017 Shree Secondary School
21	Sudha Morya (Staff Nurse)	25	F	-	-	In-depth Interview February 16, 2017

						Hirmanya VDC Health Post
22	Anjali Nau	15	F	Muslim	-	Unofficial, Informal Focus Group February 16, 2017 Hirmanya VDC, Girls Empowerment Groups, at the home it was run from
23	Puspha Yadov	17	F	Muslim	Married	Unofficial, Informal Focus Group February 16, 2017 Hirmanya VDC, Girls Empowerment Groups, at the home it was run from
24	Arti Yadov	17	F	Muslim	Unmarried	Unofficial, Informal Focus Group February 16, 2017 Hirmanya VDC, Girls Empowerment Groups, at the home it was run from
25	Bandhana Nau	13	F	Muslim	-	Unofficial, Informal Focus Group February 16, 2017 Hirmanya VDC, Girls Empowerment Groups, at the home it was run from
26	Preeti Nau	19	F	Muslim	-	Unofficial, Informal Focus Group February 16, 2017 Hirmanya VDC, Girls Empowerment Groups, at the home it was run from
27	Sangita Nau	16	F	Muslim	-	Unofficial, Informal Focus Group February 16, 2017 Hirmanya VDC, Girls Empowerment Groups, at the home it was run from

28	Nankai Moriya	15	F	Muslim	-	Unofficial, Informal Focus Group February 16, 2017 Hirmanya VDC, Girls Empowerment Groups, at the home it was run from
29	Jugunta Yadav	14	F	Muslim	-	Unofficial, Informal Focus Group February 16, 2017 Hirmanya VDC, Girls Empowerment Groups, at the home it was run from
30	Manjo Morya	15	F	Muslim	-	Unofficial, Informal Focus Group February 16, 2017 Hirmanya VDC, Girls Empowerment Groups, at the home it was run from
31	Meena Morya	15	F	Muslim	-	Unofficial, Informal Focus Group February 16, 2017 Hirmanya VDC, Girls Empowerment Groups, at the home it was run from
32	Dayawanta Yadav	20	F	Muslim	Married	Unofficial, Informal Focus Group February 16, 2017 Hirmanya VDC, Girls Empowerment Groups, at the home it was run from
33	Motisara Thapa (Girls Empowerment Group Teacher)	-	F	Muslim	-	Unofficial, Informal Focus Group February 16, 2017 Hirmanya VDC, Girls Empowerment Groups, at the home it was run from
34	Aadesh (pseudonym)	16	M	Muslim	Unmarried	Informal Focus Group February 16, 2017

						Hirmanya VDC, Community Member's Home
35	Pramod (pseudonym)	14	M	Muslim	Unmarried	Informal Focus Group February 16, 2017 Hirmanya VDC, Community Members Home
36	Tarun (pseudonym)	15	M	Muslim	Unmarried	Informal Focus Group February 16, 2017 Hirmanya VDC, Community Members Home
37	Vidur (pseudonym)	16	M	Muslim	Unmarried	Informal Focus Group February 16, 2017 Hirmanya VDC, Community Members Home Focus Group Conducted by Rory Bowe
38	Badal (pseudonym)	14	M	Muslim	Unmarried	Informal Focus Group February 16, 2017 Hirmanya VDC, Community Members Home
39	Nirmal (pseudonym)	16	M	Muslim	Unmarried	Informal Focus Group February 16, 2017 Hirmanya VDC, Community Members Home
40	Chetan (pseudonym)	24	M	Muslim	Married	Informal Focus Group February 16, 2017 Hirmanya VDC, Community Members Home
41	Lokesh (pseudonym)	20	M	Muslim	Married	Informal Focus Group February 16, 2017 Hirmanya VDC, Community Members Home
42	Bibek (pseudonym)	27	M	Muslim	Married	Informal Focus Group February 16, 2017 Hirmanya VDC,

						Community Members Home
43	Gyan (pseudonym)	20	M	Muslim	Married	Informal Focus Group February 16, 2017 Hirmanya VDC, Community Members Home
44	Neetu Khadka	15	F	Hindu	Unmarried	Focus Group February 21, 2017 Shree Secondary School
45	Sarifun Ansari	13	F	Muslim	Unmarried	Focus Group February 21, 2017 Shree Secondary School
46	Kiran Khatik	14	F	Hindu	Unmarried (will be married in a few months)	Focus Group February 21, 2017 Shree Secondary School
47	Mamta Gharti Magor	15	F	Hindu	Unmarried	Focus Group February 21, 2017 Shree Secondary School
48	Sushmila Chaudhary	15	F	Hindu	Unmarried	Focus Group February 21, 2017 Shree Secondary School
49	Sama Banu	14	F	Muslim	Unmarried	In-depth Interview February 22, 2017 Shree Secondary School
50	Ravi Chowdry	18	M	Muslim	Married (married at 16)	In-depth Interview February 24, 2017 Travellers Village Restaurant
51	Krishna Hari	17	M	Hindu	Married (married at 15)	In-depth Interview February 24, 2017 Travellers Village Restaurant
52	Elisha Chaudhary (works at a government hospital)	-	F	Hindu	-	Informal Conversation February 25, 2017 Cheers Creative Club Nepal
53	Kusum Upreti	20	F	Hindu	-	Informal Conversation February 25, 2017 Cheers Creative Club

						Nepal
54	Sushil Rajbhar	25	M	Hindu	-	Informal Conversation February 25, 2017 Cheers Creative Club Nepal
55	Hari Shankar (Head of Gausala Temple)	-	M	Hindu	Unmarried	In-depth Interview February 26, 2017 Gausala Temple, Nepalgunj
56	Head Brahman of Bageshowri	-	M	Hindu	-	In-depth Interview February 26, 2017 Bageshowri Temple, Nepalgunj
57	Brahman at Bageshowri Temple	-	M	Hindu	-	In-depth Interview February 26, 2017 Bageshowri Temple, Nepalgunj
58	Amit (pseudonym)	23	M	Muslim	Married	Focus Group Discussion, February 28, 2017 Raniyapur VDC
59	Anand (pseudonym)	23	M	Muslim	Married	Focus Group Discussion, February 28, 2017 Raniyapur VDC
60	Bandi (pseudonym)	24	M	Muslim	Married	Focus Group Discussion, February 28, 2017 Raniyapur VDC
61	Kartick (pseudonym)	24	M	Hindu	Married	Focus Group Discussion, February 28, 2017 Raniyapur VDC
62	Binod Thapa	32	M	Hindu	Married	Many Informal Conversations on Various Dates Hotel Hyatt, Nepalgunj
63	Sabi Hul Hassan (Head Religious Leader of Mosques in Nepalgunj)	-	M	Muslim	-	In-depth Interview March 2, 2017 Darul Uloom Faizunnabi Mosque, Nepalgunj
64	Mullanah Mamsoor Ahmad (Vice President of the Madrasa Board in Nepal,	-	M	Muslim	-	In-depth Interview March 2, 2017 Darul Uloom Faizunnabi Mosque, Nepalgunj

	Head Mullah of Darul Uloom Faizunnabi Mosque, Nepalgunj)					
65	Abdul Manzari (Founder of Darul Uloom Barkatiya Madrasa)	-	M	Muslim	-	In-depth Interview March 2, 2017 Darul Uloom Barkatiya Madrasa
66	Jao Mustaffa (Principal of Darul Uloom Barkatiya Madrasa)	-	M	Muslim	-	In-depth Interview March 2, 2017 Darul Uloom Barkatiya Madrasa
67	Messaj Ansari	-	M	Muslim	-	In-depth Interview March 2, 2017 Darul Uloom Barkatiya Madrasa
68	Mahemad Ali Ansari	-	M	Muslim	-	In-depth Interview March 2, 2017 Darul Uloom Barkatiya Madrasa

Group Table for Informal Conversations and Observation Days:

Number	Type of Gathering	Gender	Rough Age Range	Date and Location
1	Informal conversation, spur of the moment	M	Early teen-50 years old	February 9, 2017, A Field in Udherepur VDC Data Gathered by Rory Bowe
2	Male Empowerment Group run by CWIN Staff	M	23 boys, 12-19 years old	February 18-20 (3 day event) Shree Secondary School Observation
3	Female Empowerment Group run by CWIN	F	23 girls, 11-16 years old	February 22 and 23 Shree Secondary School Observation
4	Thematic Discussion (more informal, organised by CARE Nepal)	M, with 3 women joining later	11-16 main group	March 12, 2017 Community Centre in Ward 12, Lumbini Group facilitated by Rory Bowe, Claire Thomson, and 2 employees from Care Nepal