


The psychological impact on women during matchmaking process in arranged marriage

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Abstract

This study examines the psychological impact of the matchmaking process in arranged marriage on women in the Dhanusha district of Nepal. The research used a semi-structured interview to explore the experiences of 100 women aged 20-40 who faced evaluation during the arranged marriage matchmaking process. The findings reveal that physical appearance, particularly skin complexion, and height, is a predominant standard in bride selection, often leading to reduced self-esteem, psychological distress, and feelings of insufficiency among women who do not conform to these societal expectations. Dowry remains a significant factor in urban and rural settings adding financial and emotional burdens on women and their families. Although educational qualification offers some agency in marriage negotiations, it does not alleviate the issues related to beauty standards and dowry demands. Proficiency in domestic skills is also appreciated, particularly in traditional rural settings where educational qualification is less valued. The research contributes to the knowledge of how deeply rooted cultural and traditional norms perpetuate gender inequality and adversely affect women's mental well-being. However, the study's limited sample size and geographical region suggest the need for further research across diverse regions to gain more comprehensive insights.

Keywords: Societal beauty standards, Arranged marriage, Psychological impact, Dowry, Self-esteem

1.0 Introduction

Deeply entrenched in religious and traditional values, marriage is not only a personal commitment between two persons, it also forms social and cultural ties between the families of bride and groom. According to the Vedas, marriage is a sacred union intended to fulfill dharma (duty), procreate children, and support each other in spiritual and worldly pursuits (Sengupta, 2008). The Manusmriti, a significant ancient legal text, describes eight types of marriage. The contemporary Hindu community predominantly practices arranged marriages. These marriages are modern adaptations of the traditional “Brahma” and “Prajapatya” marriages, focusing on compatibility, familial involvement, and cultural continuity (Manu, 2005).

Arranged marriage became prominent around 500 BCE during the transition from the Vedic religion to classical Hinduism, where families and mediators select the bride and groom based on social status, compatibility, and cultural considerations rather than personal choice or romantic attraction (Brahmavadin, 1900). The match making process in arranged marriage involves relatives or trusted friends arranging meetings between the prospective bride and groom's families to assess compatibility before proceeding with marriage arrangements (Das, 2005).

The matchmaking process plays a critical role in arranged marriages, where mediators mostly arrange the first meeting between the bride and groom's families, for the evaluation of the bride's

physical appearance, including complexion, weight, height, and educational qualifications (Pandian, 2020; Bowman & David, 2013). The emphasis on physical appearance often overshadows inner qualities and professional achievements, reflecting deep-rooted societal norms and values.

Ancient literature, contemporary media, Bollywood movies, and social media all contribute to giving continuity to unrealistic beauty ideals, reinforcing the notion that physical appearance is paramount. Add to this, the propagation of beauty-centric content on social media significantly impacts women's self-esteem, self-worth, and self-image, crucially affecting their mental health and adjustment in various spheres of life.

Despite their talents, skills, and educational qualifications, women are predominantly judged based on external factors during matchmaking meetings, leading to a pervasive sense of objectification and commodification (Chattopadhyay & Chattopadhyay, 2019; Casanova & Masi, 2004). This objectification has profound psychological effects, including diminished self-esteem, feelings of inadequacy, and psychological distress (Iram & Muazzam, 2020; Mallik et al., 2023).

Against this backdrop of entrenched patriarchal traditions and societal norms, this study aims to delve deeper into the psychological impact of the matchmaking process on women in arranged marriages within the Dhanusha district of Nepal. By examining the lived experiences and narratives of women who faced the matchmaking process, this research seeks to shed light on the complex interplay of societal norms, gender dynamics, and individual well-being. The study emphasizes the need for a cultural shift towards valuing inner qualities and professional achievements in the matchmaking process, advocating for the rights and dignity of women in the context of arranged marriages.

2.0 Objective of the Study

The core objective of the study is to identify the psychological challenges faced by Hindu women throughout the matchmaking process in arranged marriages in the Dhanusha district.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the psychological pressure faced by women during evaluation in arranged marriage processes. This method is chosen for its ability to provide in-depth insights into the psychological and emotional aspects of the phenomenon (Cleland, 2017; Moser & Korstjens, 2017).

3.2 Participants

This study involved 100 married women aged 20-40 from Dhanusha district, Nepal, taken equally from Lakshminiya Rural Municipality and Janakpurdhm Sub-Metropolitan City. All participants experienced evaluation in arranged marriage meetings due to physical attributes like height, weight, skin complexion, and facial features. They represented a mix of educational background and socio-economic statuses. All the participants were from the Hindu community. The sample provided insights into the societal pressures and cultural expectations surrounding arranged marriages in urban and rural contexts within the Dhanusha district.

3.3 Data Collection Method

The semi-structured interviews were carried out to explore the evaluation processes and psychological impacts of arranged marriages on women in the Dhanusha district of Nepal. The

detailed demography of the respondents is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Demography of participants

Participants Age	Educational Background	Number of Marriage Proposals received by each woman
20-25: 12	Post-graduate: 14	1 Proposal: 34
25-30: 24	Graduate: 11	2 Proposals: 27
30-35: 39	Higher Secondary Education: 33	More than 2 Proposals: 39
35-40: 25	School Dropout (can read and write): 27	
	Illiterate: 15	

The interviews were guided by a thematic framework layering emotional and psychological well-being, experiences, and perceptions of arranged marriage, and the effect of evaluation on self-esteem and mental well-being of women. Participants were asked open-ended questions to facilitate detailed personal narratives. Interviews were conducted ensuring confidentiality and ease for participants to share their viewpoints openly. Meetings began with rapport-building questions and proceeded to thematic inquiries. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent for accurate transcription and analysis to highlight diverse experiences related to physical appearance and the role of dowry in matchmaking.

4.0 Results

Table 1 shows that only 34 women were selected during the matchmaking process on their first chance while 66 women got rejection in the matchmaking process. This fact clearly highlights the high chances of rejection of the prospective brides during the matchmaking process. The fact that about two-thirds of women had to go through the evaluation process at least twice further exemplifies the rigorous process of matchmaking.

4.1 Main Causes of Rejection in Matchmaking Process

The study identified the four main causes of rejection in the matchmaking process of arranged marriage. These causes are described in the following subsections:

4.1.1 Societal Beauty Standards

Societal beauty standards seem to be a primary criterion in arranged marriages, where other attributes such as behavioral qualities and professional achievements are overshadowed. This trend constantly replicates earlier findings (Chattopadhyay & Chattopadhyay, 2019), reporting that women who conform to orthodox beauty standards are often favored in marriage proposals, emphasizing the concept that physical appearance is supreme in the marriage market. The commodification of women based on their looks restricts the opportunities for those who do not meet these societal expectations. Rejection in marriage is a predominantly delicate issue, as it directly and indirectly impacts a woman's self-confidence and self-esteem (Iram & Muazzam,

2020). Self-esteem, which encompasses self-worth, self-respect, and self-image, plays a crucial role in a woman's mental health and psychological well-being. It significantly influences how women adjust and regulate through various spheres of life (Jan & Ashraf, 2008).

4.1.2 Dowry Practices

Dowry practices remain deeply entrenched in the Dhanusha district, with significant implications for both during the marriage process and the post-marital experiences of women. Dowry demands can delay marriages for women whose families are unable to meet these expectations, exacerbating social and economic inequalities. In Dhanusha, dowry is often determined by the groom's educational qualifications and income (Jha, 2000), a practice that places immense pressure on the bride's family and further commodifies the marriage process. Many parents are left impoverished after paying substantial dowries for their daughters, and if they cannot meet the agreed payment, the marriage could collapse (Jha, 2000). The dowry system is predominantly observed among higher caste and highly educated families within the Madheshi Community (Yadav, 2023). According to the findings of the study, despite the dominance of the upper class on the dowry system, it is affecting the lower working class in the same way.

4.1.3 Educational Qualifications

While educational qualifications are progressively highlighted in modern arranged marriages, this study finds that their importance contrasts between urban and rural settings. However, even in urban settings, educational qualifications do not excuse women from the scrutiny of societal beauty standards and dowry expectations.

In contrast, in rural areas, while education is appreciated, it is not necessarily a decisive factor in the marriage process. The ability to read and write may suffice, with less emphasis on education qualification or professional achievements. This difference highlights the persistence of traditional values in rural areas, where domestic skills and family background may still overshadow educational qualifications in marriage decisions.

4.1.4 Domestic Skills

Domestic skills, though less emphasized in urban settings, remain a significant consideration in rural areas. This study finds that rural families often inquire about a prospective bride's proficiency in household tasks, viewing these skills as essential for maintaining family harmony and fulfilling traditional gender roles. In urban settings, however, domestic skills are less likely to be a focal point, particularly if other attributes such as education and physical appearance are deemed satisfactory by the groom's family.

4.2 Variation of weightage of criteria in Urban and Rural Settings

The weightage of criteria for selection or rejection varies significantly between urban and rural settings, reflecting the social and cultural dynamics.

4.2.1 Urban Setting

In urbanized and progressive societies, education appears as the primary criterion for selecting a bride. The prospective bride is expected to possess an educational background that matches the groom's qualifications and social status. This emphasis on education is tied to the perception that an educated bride improves the family's status and lines up with the groom's lifestyle.

Beauty plays a crucial role with the bride often being regarded as a status symbol. The dual expectation of being both educated and physically attractive highlights the complex pressures to women. In urban areas, the bride's ability to perform household chores, such as cooking and cleaning, is rarely interrogated during the initial matchmaking process. These skills are considered secondary, overshadowed by the more prominent criteria of education and beauty.

Dowry, despite societal progressions, remains a deeply entrenched practice in urban areas. It is often used as a tool to negotiate perceived limitations in the bride's attributes or her family's status. Dowry thus aids as a compensatory mechanism to balance the scales in marriage negotiations.

4.2.2 Rural Settings

In contrast, rural areas prioritize different criteria. While education is gradually valued, it does not embrace the same weight as in urban settings. The ability of the bride to manage household responsibilities, including cooking and cleaning, is also important. These skills are essential for maintaining the household as it is a key expectation in rural life.

Beauty remains a significant criterion in rural settings as well. The bride's appearance is subject to scrutiny not only during the matchmaking process but also after marriage. Neighbors and relatives often compare the bride's beauty with that of other newlywed women, reinforcing the importance of societal beauty standards.

The practice of dowry in rural areas mirrors that in urban settings. In rural areas, dowry practices can take on an additional layer of significance, particularly when the prospective bride is perceived as not meeting societal beauty standards. In such cases, the groom and his family may demand dowry, specifically a cash amount, to compensate for the bride's lack of attractiveness. This practice underscores how deeply entrenched beauty standards are in rural communities, where physical appearance can significantly influence marriage negotiations. The dowry, in this context, becomes a tool to "negotiate" the perceived shortcomings in the bride's appearance, further highlighting the transactional nature of arranged marriages in these settings.

In summary, while the criteria for selection and rejection in arranged marriages share common elements across urban and rural settings, the emphasis on specific attributes—such as education in urban areas and domestic skills in rural areas—reflects the differing societal expectations and cultural norms of these environments.

4.3 Psychological Impact of Evaluation and Rejection in Arranged Marriage

Only a few women out of 66 who were rejected in their first evaluation process expressed that they did not consider the rejection seriously. They viewed their experiences as natural elements of arranged marriage and cultural norms. As a result, they expressed that such incidences did not significantly affect them emotionally or psychologically. Barring these few women, overwhelming majority of women who faced rejection experienced some sorts of psychological problems like low self-esteem and insecurity about their future marital life.

Those rejected due to non-fair color complexion were found more insecure about their marital future, forcing them to try various cosmetics to change their complexion. Likewise, many of the women who were rejected due to lower body height and over weight went on trying several measures to increase their height and lower body weight. Those failures of match-making on the ground of dowry made some women feel like commodity and anxious about their family status. Similarly, extreme unhappiness and distress were experienced by those women who had non-fair complexion along with poor family status.

5.0 Discussions

The findings of this research reveal that the matchmaking process in arranged marriages significantly impacts women's psychological well-being. Many women reported feeling objectified during this process, as their worth is often assessed based on physical appearance and conformity to societal standards. This objectification leads to a marked decline in self-esteem, prompting some women to engage in harmful practices, such as the use of various beauty products, undergoing risky cosmetic procedures, and adopting extreme dieting and irregular eating habits, all of which pose significant health risks.

Additionally, the research highlights the severe emotional consequences of rejection in the matchmaking process. Women who experienced rejection often internalize these experiences as personal failures, resulting in heightened feelings of inadequacy and diminished self-worth. Over time, these psychological stressors can lead to the development of anxiety, depression, and, in extreme cases, suicidal ideation or attempts.

The findings underscore the detrimental impact of societal beauty standards and dowry practices on women in the arranged marriage process. These criteria not only shape marriage proposals but also profoundly affect women's psychological health, particularly through the pressures to conform to unrealistic beauty ideals. The study calls for a reevaluation of these societal norms to promote a more inclusive and supportive approach to marriage, emphasizing women's intrinsic qualities and overall well-being over superficial attributes.

This study's findings shed light on the deeply ingrained societal norms and practices that continue to shape the arranged marriage process in the Dhanusha district. The influence of societal beauty standards, dowry expectations, educational qualifications, and domestic skills on marriage negotiations underscores the persistent gender inequalities and psychological pressure faced by women, despite some shifts in modern values.

6.0 Conclusion

The findings of this study underscore the complex and multifaceted nature of arranged marriages in the Dhanusha district, where traditional norms such as societal beauty standards and dowry practices continue to exert a strong influence. While there is evidence of a shift towards valuing education and professional achievements, particularly in urban areas, these advancements do not necessarily challenge the entrenched gender inequalities that persist within the marriage market.

Key findings reveal that firstly, physical appearance, particularly fair skin and height, is a predominant criterion in bride selection, leading to psychological distress among women. Secondly, dowry remains a significant factor in both urban and rural settings, adding financial and emotional burdens on women and their families. Thirdly, while higher education provides some agency in marriage negotiations, it does not eliminate the pressures related to beauty and dowry. Finally, proficiency at domestic skills seems to be an important criterion among traditional society where education is less valued than domestic skills for selection of prospective bride.

This research contributes to the understanding of how deep-rooted cultural norms surrounding beauty and dowry perpetuate gender inequality and impact women's mental health. It underscores the need for targeted interventions to address these issues.

The study's sample size is limited to 100 women, which may not fully capture the diversity of experiences across different regions and communities. Additionally, the focus on only one municipality and the other in a sub-metropolitan city restricts the generalizability of the findings.

Future research should expand to include a larger and more diverse sample across multiple regions to better understand the broader implications of these cultural practices. Longitudinal studies could provide deeper insights into the long-term psychological impacts of societal beauty standards and dowry practices on women. Additionally, exploring the perspectives of men and families involved in the arranged marriage process could offer a more comprehensive view of these cultural dynamics.

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