

Factors Affecting Female Age at Marriage in Dhankuta

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Abstract

Being a universal social institution, marriage is generally viewed to represent a very important social achievement in Nepal because its incidence is influenced by multiple socio-economic factors to differing extents. Though there has been a slow shift in the marriage age, child marriage remains prevalent, especially in rural women. It is interlinked with health as well as education and economic dimensions. The current paper attempts to discuss some proximate socioeconomic and cultural factors that shape female age at marriage in Dhankuta Municipality, as a semi-urban area where age-old customs are blending with modern social norms.

This study used a descriptive research design based on primary data from 185 ever-married women aged between 15 and 49 years collected through a structured questionnaire. Additional information was gathered from national census records and other secondary published and unpublished sources. The analysis has been carried out based on averages and percentages to trace the pattern and degree of association between some selected variables with the help of cross-tabulation with marital age. A mean age at marriage of 20.05 years has been observed to vary significantly by the education, occupation, and background of the family of women. The findings reveal that women who are literate and have attained higher schooling, and respondents from families where the main occupation is not agriculture, consistently marry later than their counterparts. Other determinants were age at menarche, type of marriage, and family structure where later biological maturity, nuclear household, and non-arranged union have a positive relationship with marital age.

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It reconfirms that the determinants of female age at marriage comprise an interplay between educational achievements, economic conditions, cultural, and biological factors. Immediate policy interventions include girls' education, non-agricultural job opportunities as well as awareness campaigns are suggested.

Keywords: age at marriage, nuptiality, socio-economic factors, socio-cultural factors, education, Nepal

Introduction

Nuptiality encompasses the timing, frequency, and dissolution of marriage in a population. While it does not directly alter population size in the same way as fertility, mortality, or migration, but closely linked to fertility and plays a critical role in demographic processes (Shryock & Siegel, 1976). The concept of marriage exhibits significant historical and cultural variations across societies, reflecting diverse customs, traditions, and social structures. In ancient civilizations, such as the Sumerians and Babylonians, marriage often involved arranged unions aimed at strengthening family alliances, while Greek and Roman societies emphasized legal frameworks, including dowries and divorce laws (Khatun & Islam, 2023). Evolutionarily, marriage likely developed from ancestral pair bonding, serving as a mechanism to link individuals into complex social groups, with its forms adapting to local ecological and subsistence conditions (Shenk, 2024). Furthermore, the understanding of marriage has evolved, influenced by factors such as religion, politics, and economic systems, transitioning from strategic alliances to emotional commitments between individuals (Zavala, 2025). Cross-culturally, marriage systems vary widely, encompassing monogamous and polygamous arrangements, which challenge Western-centric views and highlight the adaptive nature of marital practices in response to social and environmental contexts (Page & Hassan, 2024; Scelza, 2022). Marriage is defined as a legal union between persons of the opposite sex, formalized by civil, religious, or other legally recognized institutions (Shryock & Siegel, 1976).

In Nepal, marriage is almost universal, more so for women. Legally, marriage is seen as an important precursor to reproduction. There exists a strong cultural perception that it is only after marriage does one become a full member of society, and reproduction outside marriage is often socially discouraged (Dahal, 1992). Under the present law, the prescribed legal marrying age for both males and females is 20 years (Nepal Civil Code, 2017). Despite this, customary and informal marriages, occurring before the legally set age continue to prevail, particularly in the rural setup (NDHS, 2022).

The latest evidence indicated that child marriage remains a high issue in Nepal; about 35% of girls are married before attaining the age of 18 years and nearly 6% before they attain 15 years (Girls Not Brides, 2024). Over 74 thousand persons were recorded married at the ages between 10-17 by the 2021 Nepal Census further underlining prevalence of early marriage despite it being outlawed (MyRepublica,

2023). The median age at first marriage for women between ages 25–49 is about 18.3 years according to the Nepal Demographic and Health Survey (2022), while it was more generically found to be about 19 years from the 2021 Census (NDHS, 2022).

In recent years, the age of marriage policy discussion has become increasingly contentious. Because upholding the current age limit has caused legal complexity, the government proposed in 2025 to lower the legal minimum age for marriage from 20 to 18 years old (Kathmandu Post, 2025a). The United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which suggested that Nepal set the marriage age at eighteen, has endorsed this action (Kathmandu Post, 2025b).

Socioeconomic, demographic, and cultural factors are the main determinants of female marriage age in Nepal. There is a strong association between educational attainment, wealth status, caste/ethnicity, and place of residence-whether urban or rural-with the timing of marriage. Girls from rural households marry earlier than their counterparts from urban households and poor households more than wealthy ones. Other factors that ensure late marriage include parental education, media exposure, and type of occupation where non-agricultural occupations tend to delay marriage. (Shrestha & Khanal, 2023). Early marriage has documented negative outcomes, increased likelihood of early pregnancy and maternal and neonatal health complications, lost years of schooling, missed economic opportunity, and reduced autonomy.

The age at marriage is influenced by a variety of socio-economic and demographic factors, as evidenced by studies conducted in Bangladesh and Manipur. In rural Bangladesh, significant determinants include the father's occupation, the female's education level, and NGO membership, with higher education correlating with delayed marriage; notably, half of the marriages occur before the legal age of 18 (Zahangir et al., 2008; Paul et al., 2023). In Manipur, factors such as religion, educational attainment, and age at menarche were identified as critical, with a mean marriage age of 22.19 years and 16.7% marrying before 18 (Singh, 2021). A systematic review indicated that literacy and occupation also significantly affect marriage age, with a pooled average of 19.96 years across various regions (Patil et al., 2023). Education emerges as a pivotal factor in delaying marriage, while socio-economic status and cultural norms further shape these trends (Zahangir et al., 2008).

Evidence indicates that higher levels of female education are associated with delayed marriage, as schooling provides both awareness of rights and extended engagement in academic activities (Shrestha & Khanal, 2023; Aryal, 2007). Similarly, the education of parents and husbands has been shown to influence marriage timing, with more educated families often favoring later unions (Shrestha & Khanal, 2023). Because of the interaction of socio-economic status and cultural norms, in some high-status families, tradition and religious values may lead to earlier marriage, suggesting that economic factor alone is not responsible for marital timing (Aryal, 2007).

Due to deep societal norms, family pressure, and restricted access to economic and educational possibilities, early marriage is more common in rural areas and among particular ethnic and caste groups (Shrestha & Khanal, 2023). Further, biological factors such as age at menarche also influence the timing of marriage. The earlier physical maturity is attained usually leads to earlier marriages because of societal perceptions related to readiness (Aryal, 2007). These results confirm that the process is highly interactive between education and occupation with cultural and biological factors in determining marital patterns. Therefore, this study is being conducted because there has not yet been a comprehensive study focusing on this topic in the context of Dhankuta.

Method and materials

Since the main goal of this study was to analyze and characterize the socioeconomic determinants impacting women's age at marriage rather than to test causal correlations, a descriptive research approach was chosen. Dhankuta Municipality of Dhankuta District was selected as the study region because of a semi-urban setting where traditional customs and evolving social dynamics coexist, making it a suitable setting for the research subject.

In order to gather firsthand information on respondents' socioeconomic background and marital history, the study mostly relied on primary data. However, to offer more context and support the research, important secondary data from published papers, census records, and earlier studies were also explored.

To guarantee representativeness and reduce selection bias, a sample was selected using a simple random sampling technique from all of the houses in Dhankuta Municipality. In total, data was gathered from 185 married women in the studied families who were between the ages of 15 and 49. A pre-tested, structured questionnaire that was specifically created to collect information on demographics, educational attainment, occupational history, family type, and other sociocultural factors associated with marital age was used to interview the respondents.

To make analysis and cross-category comparison easier, the gathered data were systematically arranged and displayed in a straightforward tabular style. While cross-tabulations aided in examining correlations between variables, basic statistical measures like averages and percentages were employed to emphasize patterns and contrasts.

Results and Discussion

There are so many socio cultural and economic factors determine age at marriage among females. Since such determinants are complicated and, in most instances, interrelated, results are classified into three broad categories as education, occupation, and other sociocultural determinants. In this way, a more concise picture is seen about how personal characteristics, family, and broader organizations of society in different ways affect observed differences. The distribution of respondents by five years age groups is presented first.

Age Distribution of Respondents:

The mean age at marriage of females in the sample population of the study area is found to be 20.05 years. The lowest mean age at marriage is observed in the age group 15-19 years, which is 18.62 years, and the highest (20.82 years) is found in the age group 25-29 years. Except in the age group of 15-19 years, the female age at marriage is more or less the same, i.e, 20 years. The smaller number of cases reported in the 15–19 age group compared to other groups may be the reason for the comparatively lower mean age in this group.

Table 1

Mean age at marriage of respondents by age group

Age Group	Mean Age at Marriage	Case	Percentage
15-19	18.62	17	9.2
20-24	19.99	34	18.4
25-29	20.82	33	17.8
30-34	20.03	32	17.3
35-39	20.41	32	17.3
40-44	19.78	20	10.8
45-49	19.69	17	8.2
Total	20.05	185	100

Source: Field Survey, 2082

Education

Education is an important variable that can considerably affect the age at marriage. Under this title, the education of respondents, as well as the education of parents and husbands, is considered.

Table 2

Mean age at marriage and education

S. N.	Catagory	Sub Catagory	Mean age at marriage	Number	Percentage
1	Literacy of respondents	Illiterate	19.07	32	17.3
		Literate	21.30	153	82.7
		Total	20.05	185	100
2	Educational level of respondent	No formal education	20.37	21	13.72
		Primary	20.94	44	28.76
		Secondary	21.53	56	36.60
		Above	21.72	32	20.92
		Total	21.30	153	100
3	Literacy status of husband	Illiterate	19.93	23	12.4
		Literate	20.84	162	87.6

4	Educational level of husband	Total	20.05	185	100
		No formal education	19.62	17	10.5
		Primary	20.02	72	44.5
		Secondary	21.37	42	25.9
		Above	21.96	31	19.1
5	Literacy status of parents	Total	20.84	162	100
		Illiterate	19.02	44	23.8
		Literate	20.64	141	76.2
		Total	20.05	185	100
6	Educational level of parents	No formal education	18.78	37	26.2
		Primary	19.42	39	27.7
		Secondary	20.17	36	36.9
		Above	21.54	13	9.2
		Total	20.64	141	100

Source: Field Survey, 2082.

Among the total respondents, 32 (17.3%) are illiterate, while the remaining 153 (82.7%) are literate. The mean age at marriage for literate and illiterate is 21.2 years and 19.07 years, respectively. According to this study, it is convenient to say that literates tend to marry 2 years later than illiterates. The age of marriage and the level of education are found to be directly related, as the age of marriage increases with increasing level of education. women having above secondary level education have the highest mean age at marriage than those having no formal, primary or secondary level of education.

While examining the age at marriage of women on the basis of literacy and the level of education of husbands at the time of their marriage, the same pattern is seen. The age at marriage is higher (20.84 years) for those whose husbands are literate than for those whose husbands are illiterate (19.93 years). According to this fact, it can be said that the husband's literacy may have played some role in delaying marriage, indicating that female age at marriage and husband's educational level have a positive relationship.

Similarly, it is safe to assume that the educational attainment of guardians may have an influence on the age at marriage of their daughters. In general, more educated parents will prefer to better educate their daughters rather than engage them in marriage at an early age. This study also analyzed age at marriage on the basis of literacy and educational attainment of respondents' guardians. The highest level of education achieved by parents (either by father or mother) is considered the

educational attainment of guardians. Among 185 respondents, the parents of 44 females (23.8%) are illiterate. The mean age at marriage for women whose parents are illiterate is 19.09 years, and it is 20.64 years for those women whose parents are literate, showing the same repeating pattern. Also, it is observed that the age at marriage of females is 18.78 years for those women whose guardians have no formal education, and it is raised to 19.42 years, 20.17 years, and 21.54 years for those whose guardians have primary, secondary, and above the secondary level of education, respectively. It clearly shows that guardians' education plays a significant role in increasing the age at marriage for their daughters.

Occupation

Employment is another important variable which can affect the age at marriage of women. Occupations are classified into two broad groups, agriculture and non-agriculture. Under this occupation of the respondent, as well as the occupation of parents and husbands at the time of marriage, are considered.

Table 3
Mean age at marriage and occupation

S.N.	Catagory	Sub Catagory	Age at marriage	Number	Percentag e
1	Occupation of respondents	Agriculture	18.30	73	39.5
		Other than agriculture	21.01	112	60.5
		Total	20.05	185	100
2	Occupation of Husband	Agriculture	18.05	52	28.6
		Other than agriculture	21.07	133	71.4
		Total	20.05	185	100
3	Occupation of Parents	Agriculture	18.86	86	46.5
		Other than agriculture	21.75	99	53.5
		Total	20.05	185	100

Source: Field Survey, 2082.

Among the 185 participants, 62(33.5%) were engaged in agricultural work, 90 (48.7%) were engaged in non-agricultural work, and 33 (17.8%) women did not work at all at the time of their marriage. The study shows that women involved in occupations other than agriculture have significantly higher age at marriage than those involved in agriculture or who did not work at all. Women who were involved

in an occupation other than the agriculture sector before marriage tend to marry almost 2.71 years later than those who engaged in the agricultural sector and 3.08 years later than those who were not working before marriage.

Husband's occupation at the time of marriage also played a significant role in determining age at marriage of the female. The age at marriage was found to be 18.06 years and 21.07 years for the women whose husbands' occupation is agriculture and non-agriculture, respectively, at the time of marriage. Guardians' occupation is another factor that influenced the age at marriage of their daughters. Guardians' occupation is another factor that influenced the age at marriage of their daughters. This study also examined the change in the female age at marriage with the change in the types of work from agriculture to non-agriculture of their guardians. The female age at marriage is 18.86 years and 21.75 years for those women whose guardians' occupation was agriculture and non-agriculture, respectively, at the time of marriage.

This study suggests that shifting occupation, either women's or husbands' or guardians from agriculture to non-agriculture has the strong power to increase the age at marriage.

Other Factors

Besides education and occupation, there are other factors that affect a woman's age at marriage. This study covers age at menstruation, types of marriage, and types of family as other factors that affect female age at marriage.

Table 4
Mean age at marriage by age at menstruation, types of marriage and types of family

S.N.	Catagory	Sub Catagory	Age at marriage	Number	Percentage
1	Age at Menstruation	Below 14 years	19.07	33	17.8
		14 years	19.30	97	52.5
		Above 14 years	20.75	55	29.7
		Total	20.05	185	100
2	Types of Marriage	Arrange	20.85	49	26.5
		Other than arrange	19.97	136	73.5
		Total	20.05	185	100

3	Types of Family	Nuclear	21.30	76	41.1
		Extended	19.79	109	58.9
		Total	20.05	185	100

Field Survey: 2082.

Age at menarche is one of the important variables in determining the level of fertility. It can also be associated with the age at marriage. In Nepal, menstruation is viewed as a turning point in the life of a young girl due to traditional culture in the society. Once menstruation is started, parents feel that their daughters have entered into marriageable age, and they will manage to get their daughter married as soon as possible. According to this study, women who experienced menarche at age 15 or later married an average of 0.98 years later than those whose menstruation started earlier and 0.65 years later than those who started at age 14. This indicates that there is some interrelationship between age at menstruation and age at marriage of women.

The types of marriage of respondents are also another factor that affects the age at marriage. For this purpose, respondents are categorized into two groups: arranged marriage and other than arranged marriage, which includes love marriage and arranged marriage. Only 49 (26.5%) women were involved in arranged marriage, while the majority of 136 respondents (73.6%) had a marriage other than that which was arranged. The mean age at marriage is nearly 0.88 years earlier for those women who were involved in arranged marriage than for the women in other categories. It clearly shows that the types of marriage also have some impact on influencing the age at marriage of women.

Another affecting factor of female age at marriage is the type of family. In a nuclear family, marriage generally occurs at a late age because young men and women do not marry until they find themselves economically independent. But in an extended family, marriage tends to be earlier because the formation of the new household is not the question (Tuladhar, 1995). The majority of women (58.9%) are under the extended family. This study depicts that the age at marriage is higher for those women who are in a nuclear family than for those who are in an extended family. The difference in age at marriage between these groups is 1.51 years.

Conclusion

The overall analysis leads to the conclusion that Education played a great influencing factor, as literate women of higher schooling tend to get married later than their illiterate counterparts. The parental and husbands' education showed a similar effect, indicating intergenerational literacy importance in decision-making

about marriage. Occupation emerged as another strong determinant: women, husbands, and parents engaged in non-agricultural work consistently associated with later marriages compared to those in agriculture and not involved in work altogether. Other factors that contributed to the observed differences include age at menarche type of family and type of marriage. Women who had later biological maturity, from nuclear households, and in non-arranged marriages also tended to marry at older ages, showing the interaction of biological, familial and cultural dynamics. It further underscores how female marriage timing is never the prerogative of a single determinant but rather an interplay between educational opportunities and economic structures with prevailing social norms and some biological circumstances.

Promoting female education and diversification of employment opportunities together with community awareness on the effects of early marriage can contribute to raising the age at marriage in studied semi-urban areas. Covering larger geographical areas as well as using longitudinal designs to further explore causal relationships, and employing qualitative approaches to reach in truth would be effective for policy and planning, covering household decision-making and cultural influence-related components. This would sit well with helping results become more targeted for policymakers to intervene. Making such efforts would not only cause marriage delays but also improve gender equality and women's empowerment through better educational, health, and economic opportunities. This study reveals that the age of marriage is highly affected and determined by several socioeconomic factors; so, in the analysis of age at marriage in any particular place, any researchers and planners must not neglect the impact of those factors.

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