

# Let's talk about girls

Nepal has laws that prohibit child marriages, but not the enforcement mechanisms

ALEKSANDRA PERCYNKA

Laxmi is now 25. She was lured into marriage at age 15. Women in her village west of Kathmandu rarely marry after 20.

And despite the proximity of the capital, her village is dirt poor. Of the 60 households, only five have toilets. Most of the young women never went to school and if they did, they dropped out after getting married. Most of their husbands are unskilled workers and are away in the city or abroad.

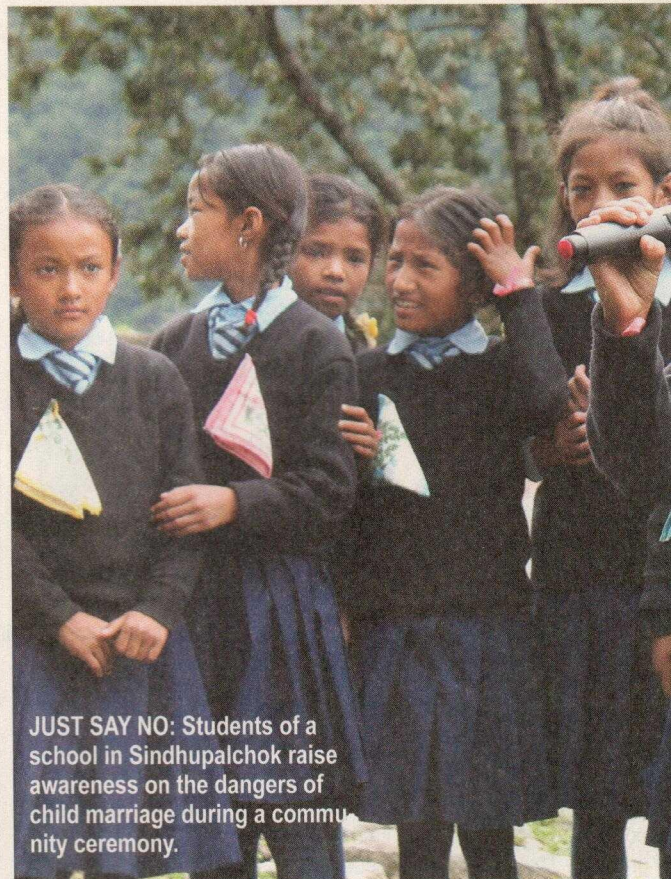
Laxmi sits on the mud floor of her kitchen chopping chicken and preparing rice for her husband's family dinner. "My parents were also happy to marry me off and it still happens," she says, "a 14-year-old girl just got married off in our village."

Despite a legal minimum age of marriage at 20, or 18 with parental consent, more than half

of Nepali women are marrying before they are 18. Ceremonies where one or both sides are below 18 are child marriages and are considered a form of gender based violence and violations of human rights as well as national and international laws.

The reasons behind child marriage vary locally, but usually it is due to strong patriarchal social norms and traditions, practices like dowry, and the preference for sons over daughters. Another reason parents marry their daughters off early is the misplaced belief that the girls will be safer. Considering that child wives are twice more likely to experience domestic and sexual violence, this perceived protection from harm is illusory. Child marriage is also strongly correlated with poverty and lack of schooling and education is considered the best prevention.

Girls who are married early drop out of school, which



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## YOUNG BRIDES

Women who marry before 18: **40%** | Women who marry before 15: **10%**

means they are often illiterate, have less job opportunities, and less access to resources. Their children are also less educated and so the vicious circle of perpetuating poverty continues across generations. Early pregnancy and childbirth, which many child wives experience, pose serious health

risks. Pregnancy complications are the leading cause for teenage girls in developing countries.

If the mother survives, she is more likely to develop health issues such as uterine prolapse, obstetric fistula the year she is. Her children are more likely to die in infancy and grow up malnourished. Young mothers are not ready or mentally, to bear the burden when they are still children themselves.

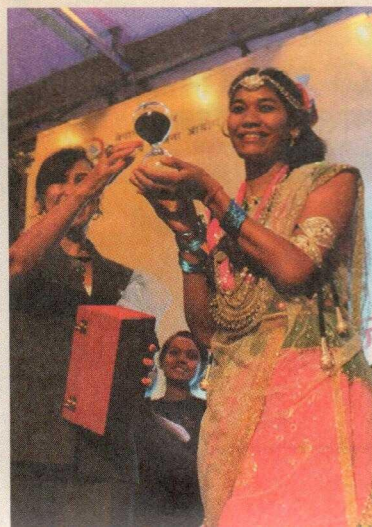
On top of the human cost of child marriage, there is evidence that the practice cripples the country's economic and development. A report from the Council on Foreign Relations shows that one extra year of education for a girl increases her wages on average by 10 per cent and the number of children she has by 25 per cent in case of child marriage. Only one in five more women with secondary education increase their

## By youth, for youth

Nepal has made dramatic progress in attaining almost all of the Millennium Development Goals achieving universal primary education and reducing child mortality. However investments made in the first decade of children's lives may fail to reap benefits when issues relating to young adults are not addressed. Nepal's 6.4 million adolescents (10-19 years) account for about a quarter of the population and yet there is no clear strategy to address their needs and the challenges they face.

To fill this gap, the National Planning Commission launched a national plan action (NPA) targeting young adults during a program in Kathmandu last week to celebrate the second International Day of the Girl Child (IDGC). Keeping with IDGC's theme of 'Innovating for Girls' Education' for this year, more than 2,000 adolescents participated in a round table dialogue with policy makers and gave their input on how to improve learning in schools through innovative teaching methods. An inter-ministerial task team under the leadership of the National Planning Commission also supported the process along with UNICEF, UNFPA, CWIN, Save the Children, Plan Nepal, ILO, Consortium of Organisations Working for Child Participation and others.

On the same occasion Urmila Chaudhary (pic, right) of Freed Kamlari Struggle





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risks. Pregnancy complications are the leading causes of death for teenage girls in developing countries.


If the mother survives, she is more likely to develop conditions such as uterine prolapse or obstetric fistula the younger she is. Her children are more likely to die in infancy or grow up malnourished. Very young mothers are not ready, physically or mentally, to bear children, when they are still children themselves.

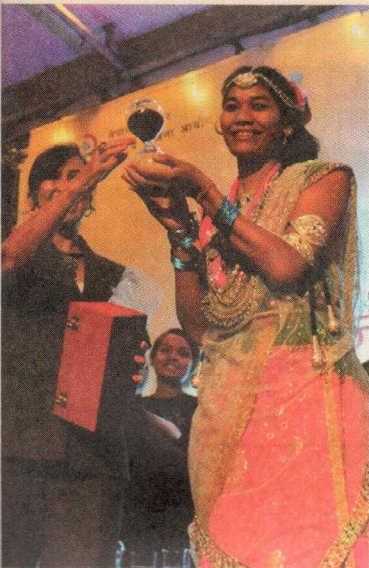
On top of the human cost of child marriage, there is also evidence that the practice cripples the country's economy and development. An analysis by the Council on Foreign Relations shows that one extra year of education for a girl increases her wages on average by 10–20 per cent and the number grows to 25 per cent in case of secondary education. Only one per cent more women with secondary education increases annual per capita income growth by 0.3 percentage points. Educated

women have more skills that improve their employability which means a better workforce and a larger consumer base for businesses. Educated women are also more active as citizens, participate more in political processes, and foster democracy.

The good news is that Nepal already has a law that stipulates minimum age at marriage, but experts say what is missing are the mechanisms to enforce it, government accountability, and the political will to prioritise the issue at the national level. At the moment, elections and the constitution take priority over social issues like child marriage, but studies have shown that a lack of women's education paralyzes the economy and development.

After she finishes feeding her family, Laxmi crouches on the kitchen floor, sips tea, and remembers her first childbirth at 17. She gave birth at home after three days of labour and was lucky both she and the baby survived. When she got married, Laxmi had no idea about her reproductive rights, contraception or abortion.

"I regret getting married so early," she says quietly, "I have forgotten my childhood." 



BHRIKUTI RAI