

Supporting Local Evidence Generation on Child, Early, and Forced Marriage

Understanding the Situation of Child, Early, and Forced Marriage at the Local Level in Madhesh Province

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Table of Contents

Table of Contents	3
List of Figures	4
List of Tables	4
Acronyms	5
Acknowledgments	6
Executive Summary	7
Key findings	8
Durga Bhagwati Municipality	8
Rajpur Municipality	8
Recommendations	9
Introduction	11
USAID and Breakthrough ACTION’s R-CEFM Project	11
Supporting Local Evidence Generation in Durga Bhagwati and Rajpur	12
Methodology	14
Data Collection Approach	14
Training	14
Variables of Interest	14
Age at Marriage	15
Caste/Ethnicity	15
Educational Attainment	15
Intentions and Perceptions	16
Data Collection Procedures	17
Data Analysis	17
Ethical Approval	18
Results	19
Child and Early Marriage	19
Caste/Ethnicity	20
Education	21
Attitudes of Parents/Guardians Regarding Early Marriage	23
Discussion and Next Steps	26
Annex 1: Classification of Social Groups in Nepal	29

List of Figures

- Figure 1. Map of Madhesh Province 12
- Figure 2. Enumerator Orientation 14
- Figure 3. Data Analysis Orientation for the Supervisors..... 17
- Figure 4. Chief Administrative Officer Distributing Bags to the Enumerators..... 17
- Figure 5. Child and Early Marriage that Took Place in the Past 20 Months in Durga Bhagwati (n=291) and in the Past 23 Months in Rajpur (n=649) 20
- Figure 6. Attitudes of Parents in Durga Bhagwati (n=220) About Girls Marrying When They Are Under 20 Years..... 24
- Figure 7. Percentage of Parents/Guardians in Durga Bhagwati (n=220) Who Think a Certain Proportion of Girl Child Marriages in Their Community Happen to Reduce Dowry Burden 24
- Figure 8. Attitudes of Parents in Rajpur (N=619) About Girls Marrying When They Are Under 20 Years . 25
- Figure 9. Percentage of Parents/Guardians in Rajpur (n=619) Who Think a Certain Proportion of Girl Child Marriages in Their Community Happen to Reduce Dowry Burden 26

List of Tables

- Table 1. Classification of education levels used in Nepal. 16
- Table 2. Percentage distribution of marriages in the past 20 months by caste/ethnicity and education in Durga Bhagwati..... 22
- Table 3. Percentage distribution of marriages in the past 23 months by caste/ethnicity and education in Rajpur..... 23

Acronyms

CEFM	Child, Early, and Forced Marriage
R-CEFM	Reducing Child, Early, and Forced Marriage
SBC	Social and Behavior Change
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

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Executive Summary

The United States Agency for International Development and Breakthrough ACTION Nepal's Reducing Child, Early, and Forced Marriage (Nepal R-CEFM) project aims to strengthen the institutional and technical capacity of the Government of Nepal in Madhesh Province to design, implement, monitor, evaluate, and coordinate effective social and behavior change (SBC) activities and strengthen the child protection system to reduce CEFM through a community-based, multisectoral, data-driven lens.

Under Nepal's newly functioning federal system, provinces and municipalities have the power, authority, mandate, and resources to determine, prioritize, plan, and implement programs to address local issues. However, the capacity to use SBC approaches is limited, as is the understanding of how SBC can improve health outcomes. The overall goal of the R-CEFM project in Nepal is to help bridge this gap by working alongside key stakeholders at the municipal and province levels to intentionally and strategically plan, design, implement, monitor, and coordinate evidence-based programs tailored to the needs of their communities.

To establish a baseline and identify key barriers and opportunities for SBC capacity within the child protection system, the R-CEFM project helped to facilitate an SBC capacity self-assessment exercise in Madhesh Province with stakeholders at the provincial level, including four municipalities in Mahottari District (Pipara, Matihani, Loharpatti, and Jaleshwar) and two in Rautahat District (Rajpur and Durga Bhagwati). The self-assessment explored local capacity in SBC program planning, implementation, monitoring, and coordination, particularly for activities to reduce CEFM. The findings revealed that a lack of local evidence for sustained advocacy on CEFM was a key barrier for evidence-based decision-making. Few municipalities or wards in Madhesh Province routinely collected information on CEFM rates in their communities. Additionally, complementary information related to CEFM, collected from other sectors, was also limited. While indicators tracked in education, health, or law enforcement exist and may be relevant for CEFM, these data are often limited by inconsistent reporting or underreporting. Data that do exist are often not shared or examined systematically by decision-makers through the lens of CEFM to inform programmatic decisions. As a result, decision-makers and key stakeholders lack access to information necessary to understand CEFM in their communities.

Within this context, the lack of evidence on CEFM represents a significant barrier to mobilizing communities to address CEFM in Madhesh Province. To address the information gap, the Nepal R-CEFM Project has prioritized increasing access to and utilization of high-quality, reliable, locally available evidence to inform local-level decision-making on CEFM. Guided by findings from the capacity assessments and municipalities' action plans, the R-CEFM project team provided technical assistance to selected municipalities as they planned, implemented, and analyzed results from a community census on CEFM at the local level. The team supported the use of KoboToolbox, a low-cost application for digital data collection, to replace paper-based tools for more timely, reliable, and efficient results. In collaboration with municipalities, the R-CEFM project team co-facilitated training with local enumerators and census supervisors regarding research ethics, study design, and data collection, and quality control. Major findings from the census conducted in Durga Bhagwati and Rajpur are summarized below.

Key findings

Durga Bhagwati Municipality

A total of 220 (6%) of the 3,952 households reported a marriage in their households in the past 20 months. From these 220 households, a total of 291 marriage events took place during this time. Out of 291 marriages, 135 daughters and 156 sons from Durga Bhagwati were reportedly married.

Among the 291 marriages that took place in the past 20 months, 8% were child marriages (individuals married at <18 years of age) and 24% were early marriages (individuals married at <20 years of age). Eighteen percent of marriages took place among those who were exactly 20 years of age.

Ten percent of the 135 daughters who married in the past 20 months were less than 18 years of age at the time of their marriage, while only 5% of the sons who married in the past 20 months were less than 18 years of age at the time of their marriage. Forty-four percent of the daughters who married in the past 20 months were under the age of 20 at the time of their marriage, while only 8% of the 156 sons who got married in the past 20 months married when under 20.

Among the daughters married in the past 20 months who were married early (i.e., before age 20, n=59), a larger percentage were from a Madheshi/Terai caste group (51%) as compared with Madheshi Dalit (32%) and Madheshi/Terai Brahmin Chhetri groups (10%). No girls married before the age of 20 in the past 20 months had the highest level of education. In contrast, 30% of daughters who married over the age of 20 had the highest level of education. Among sons married in the past 20 months who were less than 20 years old when married, 8% had received higher than a secondary level of education. In contrast, 30% of sons married in the past 20 months who were older than 20 years of age had higher education.

Rajpur Municipality

A total of 619 (7%) of the 8,513 households in Rajpur reported marriages in their households in the past 23 months. From these 619 households, a total of 649 marriage events took place. Out of 649 marriages, 344 daughters and 305 sons from Rajpur were married.

Out of 649 marriages that took place in the past 23 months, 16% were child marriages (individuals <18 years of age) and 41% were early marriages (individuals <20 years of age). Fifteen percent of marriages in the past 23 months took place among those who were exactly 20 years of age.

Twenty-three percent of the daughters who married in the past 23 months were less than 18 years of age, while only 7% of the sons who married in the past 23 months were less than 18 years of age. Fifty-four percent of daughters who married in the past 23 months were under 20 years of age, while 28% of boys who got married in the past 23 months were less than 20 years of age.

Among marriages in the past 23 months among those less than 20 years of age (n=368), households were mostly commonly Muslim, from other Madheshi/Terai caste groups, Madheshi Dalit.

Recommendations

Research has suggested that CEFM is influenced by numerous factors ranging from individuals' education, employment, and attitudes towards child marriage to household access to resources, parental and community member influence, inequitable gender norms, child marriage policies, and even where someone lives. However, lack of available local level data about CEFM remains a significant barrier to implementing effective programs locally to address CEFM. This report presents evidence from two municipalities in Madhesh Province on recent marriages to guide decision-making and investment. Evidence from Durga Bhagwati and Rajpur suggest that child marriage (6% and 16%, respectively) and early marriage (24% and 41%, respectively) are common among recent marriages in these municipalities.

Through hands-on mentoring and collaboration with municipality stakeholders, the successful implementation of these local-level data initiatives in municipalities across Madhesh Province demonstrates the ability for high-quality local data on CEFM to be collected to inform municipality programming. This skills sharing was designed to strengthen the capacity of municipality stakeholders to enable them to implement similar local-level data initiatives in the future to continue to monitor CEFM at the local level. Technical assistance focused on training and orientation on critical aspects of study design and implementation, including research ethics, digital data collection, and quality control. The transfer of these skills will enable routine collection of local evidence on CEFM and related issues to continue at the municipality level in the future.

These findings can serve as a benchmark against which to compare future data collection initiatives. They offer an initial glimpse into CEFM among marriages in the past two years. Local child rights committees and ward child rights committees can be mobilized to build on this momentum to collect data periodically to maintain an up-to-date picture of CEFM rates at the local level.

In particular, data from this initial census should be compared to other data collection efforts, such as the recent 2021 national census. Such comparisons enable us to triangulate results, assess similarities and differences across municipalities, and examine changes over time. However, it is important to note that the data reported here focused on marriages in the past two years, rather than the percentage of individuals of a certain age (e.g., 20–24) who were married before 18 or before 20.

Findings from the recent 2021 national census showed that in Madhesh province, 42% of women aged 20–24 years, and 17% of men aged 20–24 years, were married before the age of 18. In Durga Bhagwati, 52% of women aged 20–24, and 28% of men, were married before the age of 18. In Rajpur, 41% of women aged 20–24, and 13% of men, were married before the age of 18. These proportions reported from the 2021 national census were higher than the proportion of daughters and sons who were married in the last 20 months in Durga Bhagwati who were under 18 (girls: 10%; sons: 5%) and the proportion of daughters and sons who were married in the last 23 months in Rajpur who were under 18 (girls: 23%; sons: 7%). Differences may reflect normative changes in CEFM between when the national census data were collected and when this local level assessment was implemented or differences in how

prevalence of child marriage was calculated. There were similar trends in age of marriage for women and men in both the results presented in this report and the 2021 national census, with a larger percentage of women married before 18 than men. Future examination of 2021 national census findings should further examine CEFM at the municipality level to further compare with findings presented here. In addition, these findings should also be compared with results of future data collection efforts over time to assess trends in CEFM rates at the local level. This will enable municipalities to assess the effects of their activities designed to address CEFM.

Ultimately, the skills developed and reinforced through this local-level evidence generation initiative can be adapted by municipalities to facilitate rapid data collection on other local-level priorities related to health and social development.

Introduction

Child protection is central to numerous laws and policies in Nepal. The 2015 Constitution of Nepal reinforces the importance of enforcing children’s rights.¹ The Nepal Civil Code Act of 2017 forbids marriage under the age of 20 years,² while the National Policy for Children of 2013 aims to end early marriage (defined as marriage below the age of 20 years).² The Children’s Act of 2018 supports these regulations and emphasizes that government agencies, development partners, and relevant working partners at the community level need to make a joint effort to curb child marriage.²

Despite the laws, child marriage remains prevalent in regions across Nepal. In the most recent Demographic and Health Survey conducted in Nepal, 40% of women aged 20–24 years reported³ being married before the age of 18 (defined as child marriage). While provinces across Nepal have demonstrated reductions in child marriage in recent years, such changes have been less pronounced in Madhesh Province.

USAID and Breakthrough ACTION’s R-CEFM Project

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and Breakthrough ACTION Reducing Child, Early, and Forced Marriage (R-CEFM) project aims to strengthen the capacity of the Government of Nepal’s child protection system in social and behavior change (SBC), specifically as it relates to reducing child, early, and forced marriage (CEFM) in Madhesh Province. This USAID-funded project works at both the province and municipality levels in Madhesh Province. Under Nepal’s newly functioning federal system, provinces and municipalities have the power, authority, mandate, and resources to determine, prioritize, plan, and implement programs to address local issues. However, capacity to use SBC approaches is limited, as is the understanding of how SBC can improve health outcomes. The overall goal of Breakthrough ACTION in Nepal is to help bridge this gap by working alongside key stakeholders at the municipal and province levels to intentionally and strategically plan, design, implement, monitor, and coordinate evidence-based programs tailored to the needs of their communities.

To establish a baseline and identify key barriers and opportunities for SBC capacity within the child protection system, the R-CEFM project helped to facilitate an [SBC capacity self-assessment exercise](#) in Madhesh Province with stakeholders at the provincial level, including four municipalities in Mahottari

¹ Constituent Assembly Secretariat of Nepal. (2015). *Constitution of Nepal 2015*. <https://lawcommission.gov.np/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Constitution-of-Nepal.pdf>

² Nepal Law Commission. (2018). *The Act Relating to Children, 2075 (2018)*. <https://www.lawcommission.gov.np/en/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/The-Act-Relating-to-Children-2075-2018.pdf>

³ Ministry of Health and Population. *Nepal Demographic Health Survey 2016*. <https://dhsprogram.com/publications/publication-fr336-dhs-final-reports.cfm>

District (Pipara, Matihani, Loharpatti, and Jaleshwar) and two in Rautahat District (Rajpur and Durga Bhagwati). The self-assessment explored local capacity in SBC program planning, implementation, monitoring, and coordination, particularly for activities to reduce CEFM. Based on this assessment, the lack of local evidence for sustained advocacy on CEFM was cited as a key barrier for evidence-based decision-making. Few municipalities or wards in Madhesh Province routinely collect information on CEFM rates in their communities. Additionally, complementary information related to CEFM, collected from other sectors, is also limited. While indicators tracked in education, health, or law enforcement may exist and be relevant for CEFM, these data are often limited because of inconsistent reporting or underreporting. Data that do exist are often not shared or systematically examined by decision-makers through the lens of CEFM to inform programmatic decisions. As a result, decision-makers and key stakeholders lack access to information necessary to understand CEFM in their communities.

Within this context, the lack of evidence on CEFM is a significant barrier to mobilizing communities to address the issue. To address this information gap, the Nepal R-CEFM Project has prioritized increasing access to and utilization of high-quality, reliable, locally available evidence to inform local-level decision-making on CEFM. Guided by findings from the capacity assessments and municipalities’ action plans, the R-CEFM project team provided technical assistance to selected municipalities to plan, implement, and analyze results from a community census on CEFM at the local level. All of the R-CEFM project working municipalities allocated a budget for generating local-level CEFM data to close the existing local evidence gap. Among these municipalities, Durga Bhagwati municipality and Rajpur municipality completed CEFM data collection in 2022 for use in evidence-based planning for the upcoming fiscal year. Figure 1 shows a map of Madhesh Province and R-CEFM project municipalities.

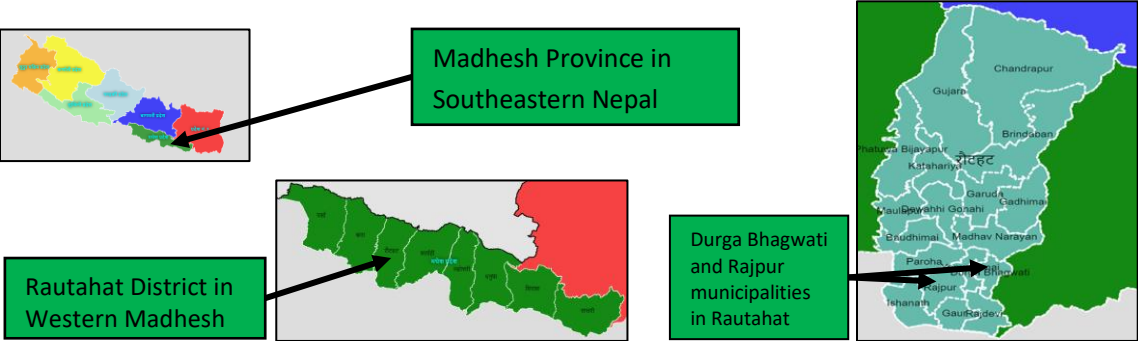


Figure 1. Map of Madhesh Province

Supporting Local Evidence Generation in Durga Bhagwati and Rajpur

Guided by findings from capacity self-assessments and their action plans, Durga Bhagwati and Rajpur conducted a local census to assess CEFM in all wards (five wards in Durga Bhagwati and nine wards in Rajpur). Durga Bhagwati municipality collected information regarding local marriages that took place

between July 16, 2020 (Shrawan 1, 2077) and March 14, 2022 (Falgun 30, 2078), while Rajpur municipality did the same for local marriages that took place between July 16, 2020 (Shrawan 1, 2077) and June 29, 2022 (Asar 15, 2077).

The R-CEFM team provided technical support to the municipality stakeholders for these local data collection initiatives. The design and implementation of these assessments was collaborative, with the R-CEFM project working closely with municipality stakeholders to identify objectives, finalize the study design, plan for training and orientations, and organize logistics. The R-CEFM project worked with municipality stakeholders to design training materials, including content on research ethics and digital data collection, prioritize questions for data collection tools, develop quality assurance procedures, and analyze data after collection was complete.

In each municipality, the Women and Children Section chief, health coordinator, child welfare officer, local child rights committee members, and ward child rights committee members were trained as supervisors for data collection. These supervisors played a pivotal role in the development of questionnaires and the training of enumerators for data collection.

Enumerators were recruited and selected by each municipality, with selection taking place independently of the R-CEFM project. Selection criteria included being a young adult more than 18 years of age (i.e., 18–24 years of age). Unmarried girls above 20 years of age were prioritized for selection.

The project advisory committee meeting chaired by the municipality chairperson selected 12 enumerators from among the 18 applicants in Durga Bhagwati and 30 in Rajpur from more than 100 applicants. Supervisors (six in Durga Bhagwati and four in Rajpur) were appointed from among the technical officers and section chiefs from within the municipalities. The Women and Children Section focal person was assigned the role to supervise the overall program.

The main objective of the technical support provided by the R-CEFM project was to train and mentor municipality-level stakeholders to be able to independently conduct CEFM-related data collection using KoboToolbox, an application for digital data collection. Through hands-on mentoring and collaboration, the aim is for municipalities to have the capacity to plan and conduct similar assessments—with in-house capacity—in the future to monitor progress on addressing CEFM in their municipalities.

Methodology

A census was used as a data collection method following the objectives identified by the municipalities. A complete list of wards with the total number of households in each was obtained from the National Population Census 2011 to calculate the total number of households in the municipality, while an estimated incremental population change data from 2011 to 2022 was provided by the municipality. Recently published preliminary reports from Census 2021 were used for estimates of household numbers in Rajpur.

Data Collection Approach

KoboToolbox, a digital software application, was used to facilitate rapid and high-quality local-level data collection in both Durga Bhagwati and Rajpur. Each municipality was interested in using the KoboToolbox because it is superior to other data collection tools in terms of greater efficiency, lower cost, and higher quality. KoboToolbox allows the inclusion of logical checks and prefillable answers that enable the study team to reduce errors during data collection. It also allows enumerators to implement skip logic electronically to ensure that participants are only asked relevant questions (which is done manually when using paper-based data collection methods). Moreover, this electronic application saves resources that would otherwise be needed for printing and data entry, and it greatly reduces the time needed for data cleaning.

Training

A two-day orientation was first organized to train and orient supervisors on the data collection methodology, research ethics, and questionnaires used. The supervisors were also introduced to using the KoboToolbox application to create questionnaire forms. Following this initial orientation, the trained supervisors then conducted a two-day orientation with enumerators to instruct them on the research methodology, research ethics, and demonstrated data collection using the KoboToolbox application. Both orientations were managed and facilitated by the municipalities.



Figure 2. Enumerator Orientation

Variables of Interest

Questionnaires administered to participants focused primarily on socio-demographic characteristics of individuals involved in marriages that had taken place within households within the past 20 months. In addition to CEFM, municipalities also collected information related to child labor in Durga Bhagwati and Rajpur. Below, we summarize key variables related to CEFM for which data were collected in municipalities.

Age at Marriage

Census participants (parents/guardians) were asked about age at marriage for their daughters, sons, or both as well as for their daughters-in-law, sons-in-law, or both. Responses were open ended during data collection and categorized into four age categories for analysis:

- Child marriage (<18 years): All reported marriages for which a son or daughter was less than 18 years (up to the age of 17 years, 364 days) when the marriage took place.
- Early marriage (<20 years): All reported marriages for which a son or daughter was less than 20 years (up to the age of 19 years, 364 days) when the marriage took place.
- Marriage at exactly 20 years: All reported marriages at which a son or daughter was exactly 20 years of age.
- Marriage after 20 years (>20 years): All reported marriages at which a son or daughter was more than 20 years of age.

Caste/Ethnicity

Caste/ethnic groups were defined as per caste categorization of the Government of Nepal Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) Census 2001. Groups included the following:

- Madheshi/Terai Brahmin and Chhetri
- Terai Janajati
- Madheshi Dalit
- Other Madheshi/Terai caste group
- Muslim
- Hill Mountain Brahmin/Chhetri

Educational Attainment

Educational attainment was categorized using the definitions in Table 1.

TABLE 1. CLASSIFICATION OF EDUCATION LEVELS USED IN NEPAL.

Level of Education	Definitions
Higher education	Enrolled or completed education above 12th grade or university-level education
Secondary education	Enrolled or completed education above basic up to 12th grade ⁴
Basic education	Completed education up to 8th grade
Madrassa-based	Enrolled or completed equivalent to basic level education of formal education (Note: Only in Rajpur)
Literate/no formal education ^a	Able to read and write but did not receive any formal education
Illiterate/no formal education ^a	Cannot read or write/no formal or informal education

^aNo formal education in Durga Bhagwati included both those who were literate and illiterate. In Rajpur, those with no formal education who were literate were disaggregated from those with no formal education who were illiterate.

Intentions and Perceptions

In addition to demographic characteristics, intentions and perceptions of parents/guardians with regard to the following were also collected.⁵ Parents/guardians were asked about their level of agreement (from *strongly agree* and *agree* to *disagree* to *strongly disagree*) with a set of three questions:

1. Sons should not be married to a girl younger than 20 years.
2. Daughters should not be married younger than 20 years.
3. Marrying girls younger than 20 years puts them at a risk of having birth complications.

The households where there were no marriages during the specified recall period were not asked these intention and perception questions.

⁴ Dilas, D.B., Cui, J., Trines, S. (2018). *Education in Nepal*. <https://wenr.wes.org/2018/04/education-in-nepal>

⁵ The R-CEFM project, in coordination with the provincial Ministry of Women, Children, Youth and Sports and other development partners working on R-CEFM in Madhesh Province, is in process of developing and pilot-testing CEFM measurement guidelines for use at the local level. These guidelines outline a set of 13 indicators, which include three indicators related to ideational factors related to CEFM. In particular, these three indicators are focused on intentions and perceptions of parents related to child and early marriages. While most of the indicators out of those 13 have secondary sources for data, those related to CEFM-related intentions and perceptions require new primary data collection. Durga Bhagwati and Rajpur municipalities agreed to test CEFM measurement guidelines indicators as a part of this locally led CEFM census.



Figure 3. Data Analysis Orientation for the Supervisors



Figure 4. Chief Administrative Officer Distributing Bags to the Enumerators

Data Collection Procedures

During data collection, study participants were introduced to the study, its purpose, and its importance. Data collectors obtained oral informed consent from the heads of households prior to any data collection. As part of the informed consent, the voluntary nature of participation was emphasized and aspects of confidentiality and privacy were explained in detail. It was made clear that no personally identifiable information would be collected or linked to the data collected by the study. Participants were also informed that the study was not linked in any way to any services provided by or accessed from the municipalities. Enumerators were recruited locally, which ensured they had knowledge of local languages and context. Enumerators worked in pairs in a given ward, which was helpful to clarify minor issues on understanding and use of the KoboToolbox application. The municipalities also provided back packs, umbrellas, and stationery to the enumerators and supervisors. The supervisors also provided on-site support on a daily basis during the data collection period. A WhatsApp group was formed to notify the technical support team about updates and clarifications. Every evening, the collected data on KoboToolbox was reviewed, and the R-CEFM Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) technical team provided feedback for consistency, completeness, and timeliness.

Data Analysis

Following completion of data collection and review of full datasets for consistency, completeness, and timeliness, a two-day data analysis orientation led by the R-CEFM Project was held to train the supervisors on the types of data collected and extraction of data from KoboToolbox. The training focused on how to understand, clean, analyze, and interpret the data. The supervisor team engaged with all descriptive analyses, with the R-CEFM team leading a more detailed analysis of the associations

between socio-demographic characteristics and CEFM-related outcomes. Municipality staff who were engaged required more skills and practice to conduct detailed analysis independently.

The data are presented in frequencies and percentages to identify the percentage of recent marriages that included a person who was under 18 (child marriage), under 20 (early marriage), exactly 20 years, or over the age of 20 years to identify any trends in the different age categories. CEFM intentions and perceptions of parents/guardians are also presented using frequencies and percentages. Associations were examined between marriage type (child marriage, early marriage, or older than 20) and key socio-demographic characteristics, including caste/ethnicity, religion, and education. Statistical significance tests were not performed for the analyses presented here due to the small number of marriages captured by the study. Excel was used for analysis to generate frequencies and percentages through pivot tables.

Ethical Approval

The purpose of data collection was for internal use by the municipality; therefore, it did not require local Institutional Review Board submission and approval. A Public Health Practice application was submitted and approved by the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health Institutional Review Board for the technical support provided by the R-CEFM Project to support this local evidence generation activity.

Results

Among the five wards in Durga Bhagwati, 3,952 households out of a total of 3,990 households that were approached agreed to participate in the study. Among the nine wards in Rajpur, 8,513 households out of the 8,566 households approached agreed to participate. Among non-participating households, either no one was at home (n=34 in Durga Bhagwati and n=33 in Rajpur) or the household head did not agree to participate (n=4 in Durga Bhagwati and n=20 in Rajpur).

The results presented below detail differences in the proportion of marriages within the past 20 months (Durga Bhagwati) or within the past 23 months (Rajpur) that were child marriages (the household member was married at <18 years of age), early marriages (the household member was married at <20 years), marriages where the household member was exactly 20 years of age, and marriages where the household member was more than 20 years of age.

For Durga Bhagwati, in the period of 20 months prior to the census, 220 (6%) of the 3,952 households reported a marriage in their households. From these 220 households, a total of 291 marriage events took place. Out of 291 marriages, 135 daughters and 156 sons were reportedly married. In Rajpur, in the 23 months prior to the census, 619 (7%) of the 8,513 households reported marriages in their households. From these 619 households, a total of 649 marriage events took place. Out of 649 marriages, 344 daughters and 305 sons were married.

Child and Early Marriage

Out of 291 marriages that took place in Durga Bhagwati Municipality in the past 20 months, the percentage of child marriage and early marriage was 8% and 24%, respectively (Figure 5). Twenty-four percent of marriages that took place included a daughter or son who was less than 20 years of age. Eighteen percent of marriages that took place included a daughter or son who was exactly 20 years of age.

Likewise, out of 649 marriages that took place at Rajpur Municipality in the past 23 months, the percentage of marriages that were child marriages and early marriages was 16% and 41%, respectively (Figure 5).

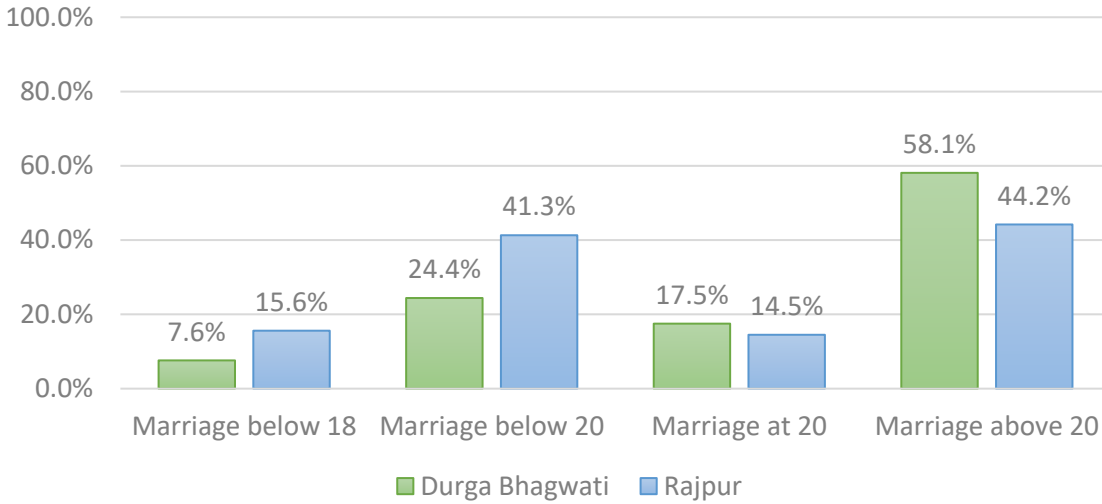


Figure 5. Child and Early Marriage that Took Place in the Past 20 Months in Durga Bhagwati (n=291) and in the Past 23 Months in Rajpur (n=649)

In Durga Bhagwati, 44% of the daughters who married in the past 20 months (n=135) were under the age of 20 years at marriage, while only 8% of the sons who married in the past 20 months (n=156) were under 20 years of age (Table 2). Similarly, 10% of daughters who married in the past 20 months were less than 18 years of age at the time of marriage, while only 5% of sons who were married during this time period married when they were less than 18 years of age.

In Rajpur, 54% of the daughters who married in the past 23 months (n=344) were under the age of 20 years at the time of marriage, while only 28% of the sons who married in the past 23 months (n=305) married when under 20 years of age (Table 3). Similarly, 23% of daughters who were married in the past 23 months were less than 18 years of age at the time of marriage, while only 7% of sons were less than 18 years of age when they married during this time period.

Demographic Factors Associated with Child and Early Marriage

Caste/Ethnicity

Table 2 shows that in Durga Bhagwati, among daughters married in the past 20 months who were under 18 years (i.e., child marriage), half (50%) were from Madheshi/Terai caste groups and half (50%) were Madheshi Dalit. Moreover, among the daughters who were married in the past 20 months who were married early (i.e., before age 20), a larger percentage were from a Madheshi/Terai caste group (51%) as compared with Madheshi Dalit (32%) and Madheshi/Terai Brahmin Chhetri groups (10%). The smallest percentage of the daughters married within the past 20 months before the age of 20 years were from Muslim (3%) and Terai Janajati (3%) households. Among sons who were married in the past 20 months before the age of 18 (n=8), most were from other Madheshi/Terai caste groups (63%). Among sons who

were married in the past 20 months before the age of 20 (n=12), 50% were from a Madheshi/Terai caste group, whereas 25% were Terai Janajati, 17% were Madheshi/Terai Brahmin Chhetri, and 8% were from Madheshi Dalit households.

Table 3 shows that in Rajpur, among daughters married in the past 23 months who were under 18 years (i.e., child marriage), 62% were from Muslim households and 33% were from other Madheshi/Terai caste groups. Among sons who were married in the past 23 months before the age of 18, 91% were from Muslim households and 9% were from other Madheshi/Terai caste groups. A similar trend was observed for boys married in the past 23 months who were less than 20 years of age.

Education

As shown in Table 2, in Durga Bhagwati, 50% of the daughters who got married under 18 years had a basic education, whereas 29% had a secondary education and 21% received no formal education and were not literate. In comparison, 42% of the daughters married in the past 20 months who were married before turning 20 years old had at least basic level education, whereas 25% had a secondary level of education. No girls married in the past 20 months who were married before the age of 20 had the highest level of education. In contrast, 30% of daughters married in the past 20 months who were older than 20 years of age had higher education.

Table 2 shows a similar negative association between education and age of marriage among sons married in the past 20 months in Durga Bhagwati. Among sons married in the past 20 months who were less than the age of 20 when married, 33% had received a basic education, 33% had received a secondary education, and 8% had received higher education. In contrast, 30% of sons married in the past 20 months who were older than 20 years of age when married had higher education.

In Rajpur (Table 3), owing to the larger Muslim population, educational attainment included attendance at Madrasa-based institutions. For marriages within the past 23 months for which individuals were less than 20 years of age when married, a higher percentage of sons were illiterate (42%) than daughters (36%; Table 3). Less than 1% of the daughters and less than 4% of the sons married in the past 20 months who were married before turning 20 years old had higher education. In contrast, 7% of the daughters and 13% of the sons married in the past 20 months who were over 20 years of age had higher education.

TABLE 2. PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF MARRIAGES IN THE PAST 20 MONTHS BY CASTE/ETHNICITY AND EDUCATION IN DURGA BHAGWATI

Age (years)	Daughter (n=135)				Son (n=156)			
	<18 (n=14)	<20 (n=59)	20 (n=26)	>20 (n=50)	<18 (n=8)	<20 (n=12)	20 (n=25)	>20 (n=119)
Caste/ethnicity								
Other Madheshi/Terai caste group	50.0	50.8	42.3	40.0	62.5	50.0	36.0	40.3
Terai Janajati	0.0	3.4	3.8	2.0	25.0	25.0	0.0	1.7
Hill Mountain Brahmin/Chhetri	0.0	0.0	3.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Madheshi/Terai Brahmin and Chhetri	0.0	10.2	23.1	44.0	0.0	16.7	20.0	24.4
Madheshi Dalit	50.0	32.2	26.9	14.0	12.5	8.3	40.0	28.6
Muslim	0.0	3.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	4.0	5.0
Education								
Illiterate/no formal education	21.4	30.5	30.8	20.0	25.0	25.0	32.0	12.6
Literate/no formal education	0.0	1.7	3.8	4.0	0.0	0.0	8.0	2.5
Basic education	50.0	42.4	30.8	10.0	37.5	33.3	40.0	15.1
Secondary education	28.6	25.4	23.1	36.0	37.5	33.3	8.0	39.5
Higher education	0.0	0.0	11.5	30.0	0.0	8.3	12.0	30.3
Total % of marriages	10.4	43.7	19.3	37.0	5.1	7.7	16.0	76.3

TABLE 3. PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF MARRIAGES IN THE PAST 23 MONTHS BY CASTE/ETHNICITY AND EDUCATION IN RAJPUR

Age (years)	Daughter (n=344)				Son (n=305)			
	<18 (n=79)	<20 (n=184)	20 (n=57)	>20 (n=103)	<18 (n=22)	<20 (n=84)	20 (n=37)	>20 (n=184)
Caste/ethnicity								
Other Madheshi/Terai caste group	32.9	33.2	47.4	37.9	9.1	11.9	32.4	32.1
Terai Janajati	0.0	1.6	5.3	6.8	0.0	0.0	5.4	1.1
Hill Mountain Brahmin/Chhetri	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Madheshi/Terai Brahmin and Chhetri	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Madheshi Dalit	5.1	5.4	5.3	7.8	0.0	7.1	2.7	9.2
Muslim	62.0	59.8	42.1	47.6	90.9	81.0	59.5	57.6
Education								
Illiterate/no formal education	8.9	36.4	7.0	17.5	13.6	41.7	35.1	31.5
Literate/no formal education	31.6	5.4	21.1	3.9	31.8	6.0	5.4	7.1
Basic level	17.7	16.8	15.8	25.2	27.3	20.2	13.5	14.7
Secondary education	11.4	15.8	33.3	30.1	18.2	14.3	21.6	25.0
Higher education	1.3	0.5	1.8	6.8	0.0	3.6	2.7	12.5
Madrasa	29.1	25.0	21.1	16.5	9.1	14.3	21.6	9.2
Total % of marriages	23.0	53.5	16.6	29.9	7.2	27.5	12.1	60.3

Attitudes of Parents/Guardians Regarding Early Marriage

In Durga Bhagwati, attitudes regarding early marriage were assessed among household heads (parents/guardians) in households where a son or daughter had gotten married in the past 20 months. Figure 6 shows that among 220 parents/guardians asked, 19% of the parents strongly agreed and 64% agreed that sons should not be married to a girl younger than 20 years. Similarly, 22% of the parents/guardians strongly agreed and 58% agreed that daughters should not be married younger than 20 years. In addition, 45% of parents/guardians strongly agreed and 35% agreed that girls being married at younger than 20 years puts them at a risk of having birth complications.

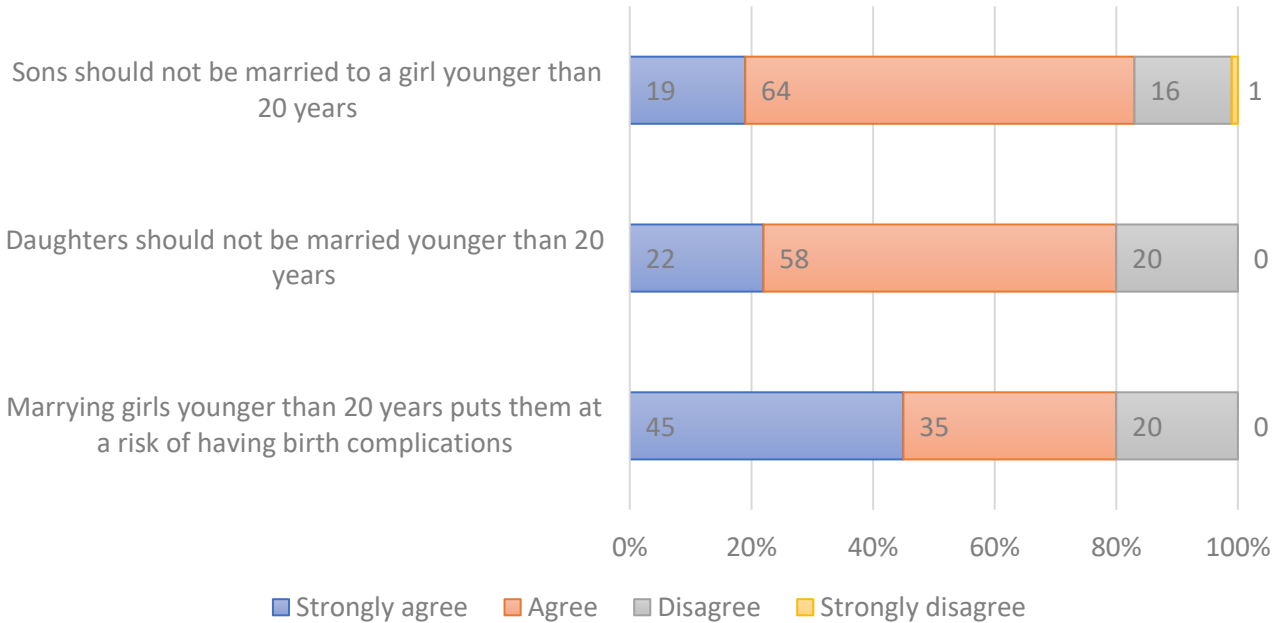


Figure 6. Attitudes of Parents in Durga Bhagwati (n=220) About Girls Marrying When They Are Under 20 Years

When respondents in Durga Bhagwati were asked about the frequency of daughters in their communities that are married before age 20 to reduce the dowry required, 14% of the parents/guardians said that most of the marriages are arranged before 20 years to reduce dowry, while 73% said there are a few marriages for this reason, and 13% said none of the marriages are arranged for this reason (Figure 7).

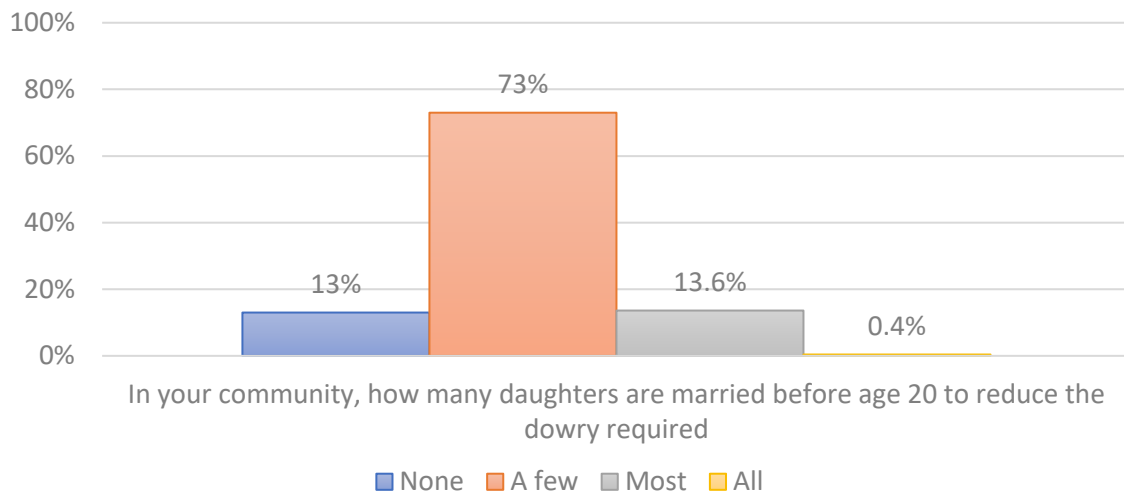


Figure 7. Percentage of Parents/Guardians in Durga Bhagwati (n=220) Who Think a Certain Proportion of Girl Child Marriages in Their Community Happen to Reduce Dowry Burden

In Rajpur, attitudes regarding early marriage were assessed among household heads (parents/guardians) in households where a son or daughter had gotten married in the past 20 months. Figure 8 shows that among 619 parents/guardians asked, 7% of the parents strongly agreed and 81% agreed that sons should not be married to a girl younger than 20 years. Similarly, 11% of the parents/guardians strongly agreed and 71% agreed that daughters should not be married younger than 20 years. Fourteen percent of parents/guardians strongly agreed and 81% agreed that girls being married at younger than 20 years puts them at risk of having birth complications.

When respondents were asked about the frequency of daughters in their communities that are married before age 20 to reduce the dowry required, 27% of the parents/guardians said that most of the marriages are arranged before 20 years to reduce dowry, while 58% said there are a few marriages for this reason, and 11% said none of the marriages are arranged for this reason (Figure 9).

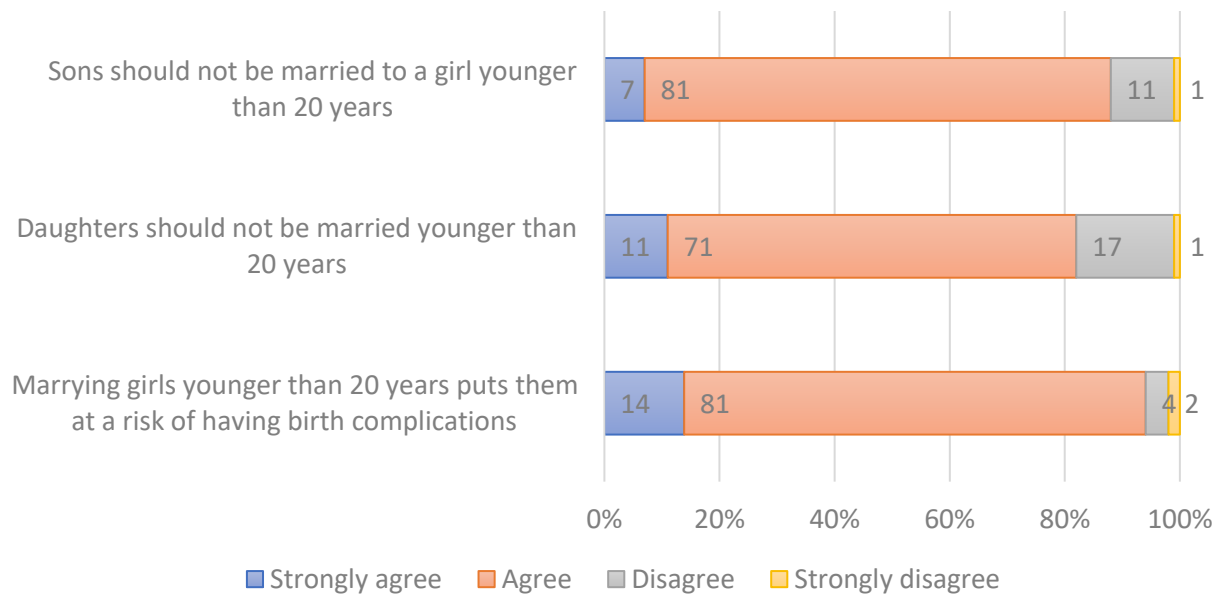


Figure 8. Attitudes of Parents in Rajpur (N=619) About Girls Marrying When They Are Under 20 Years

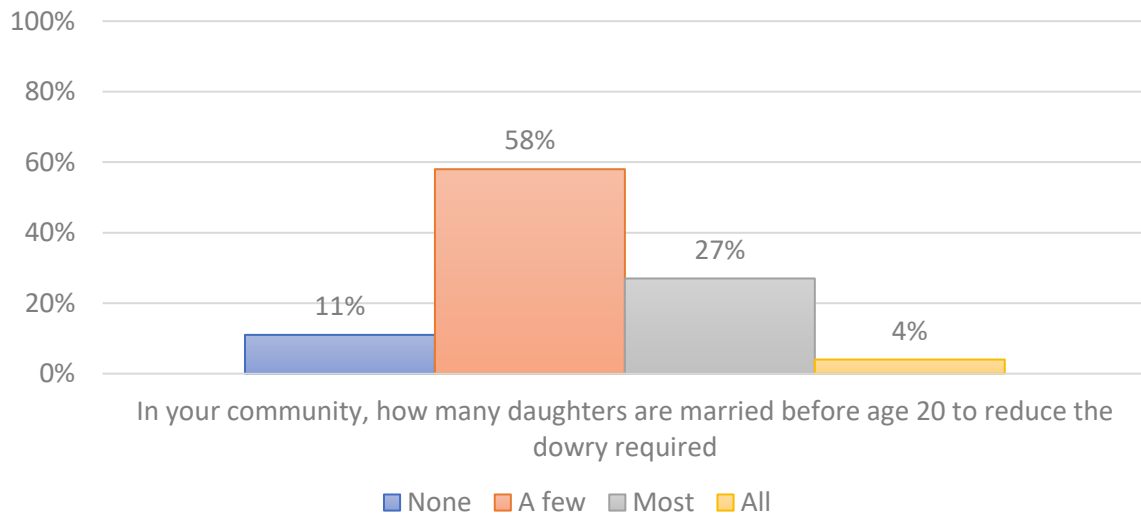


Figure 9. Percentage of Parents/Guardians in Rajpur (n=619) Who Think a Certain Proportion of Girl Child Marriages in Their Community Happen to Reduce Dowry Burden

Discussion and Next Steps

Although the legal age of marriage for men and women in Nepal is 20 years, CEFM remains a common practice in Madhesh Province. Research has suggested that CEFM is influenced by numerous factors ranging from individuals’ education, employment, and attitudes towards child marriage to household access to resources, parental and community member influence, inequitable gender norms, child marriage policies, and even where someone lives. However, lack of available local level data about CEFM remains a significant barrier to implementing effective programs locally to address CEFM. This report presents evidence from two municipalities in Madhesh Province on recent marriages to guide decision-making and investment.

Evidence from Durga Bhagwati and Rajpur suggest that child marriage (6% and 16%, respectively) and early marriage (24% and 41%, respectively) are common among recent marriages in these municipalities. In Durga Bhagwati municipality, the difference in percentage of child as well as early marriage among the people married in the past 20 months is markedly higher among girls (Durga Bhagwati, 44%; Rajpur, 54%) than among boys (Durga Bhagwati, 8%; Rajpur, 28%). These findings provide up-to-date, local data on CEFM that can be used by municipalities to guide decision-making and investment.

Comparatively, findings from the recent 2021 national census showed that in Madhesh province, 42% of women aged 20–24 years, and 17% of men aged 20–24 years, were married before the age of 18. In Durga Bhagwati, 52% of women aged 20–24, and 28% of men, were married before the age of 18. In Rajpur, 41% of women aged 20–24, and 13% of men, were married before the age of 18. These

proportions reported from the 2021 national census were higher than the proportion of daughters and sons who were married in the last 20 months in Durga Bhagwati who were under 18 (girls: 10%; sons: 5%) and the proportion of daughters and sons who were married in the last 23 months in Rajpur who were under 18 (girls: 23%; sons: 7%). Differences may reflect normative changes in CEFM between when the national census data were collected and when this local level assessment was implemented or differences in how prevalence of child marriage was calculated. There were similar trends in age of marriage for women and men in both the results presented in this report and the 2021 national census, with a larger percentage of women married before 18 than men. Future examination of 2021 national census findings should further examine CEFM at the municipality level to further compare with findings presented here. In addition, these findings should also be compared with results of future data collection efforts over time to assess trends in CEFM rates at the local level. This will enable municipalities to assess the effects of their activities designed to address CEFM.

The findings showed that in Durga Bhagwati, the percentage of child marriages among girls was similar for Terai Janajati and other Madheshi/Terai caste groups. Similarly, early marriages among girls took place across Madheshi Dalit, Madheshi/Terai Brahmin Chhetri, Muslim, and Terai Janajati caste/ethnic groups. This finding indicates that child and early marriages took place across all caste/ethnic groups. However, households that identified as Muslim had a higher percentage of marriages in Rajpur than in Durga Bhagwati.

In the case of Durga Bhagwati, a clear negative association was found between education and age of marriage for both girls and boys. These findings are consistent with the previous qualitative rapid assessment conducted by the R-CEFM Project, which showed that families are often reluctant to invest in daughters' education because schools are far away and insecure and are of poor quality. It may also be that funds that could be used to support daughters' education are saved for dowry instead. These reasons are often linked with girls being married early while they are in primary and secondary education level. Overall, a similar trend was observed in Rajpur. Among marriages in the past 23 months, the percentages of girls and boys with a secondary education or a higher education were higher for those married at >20 years of age than among those married at <20 years of age.

More than 80% of the parents/guardians in both Durga Bhagwati and Rajpur agreed or strongly agreed that daughters should not be married before 20 years of age and if married early, they have a high risk of birth complications. However, 44% of the recent marriages among daughters in Durga Bhagwati were among daughters <20 years of age. Similarly, 54% of the recent marriages among daughters in Rajpur were among daughters married before the age of 20. The dowry burden may be an important factor linked with this contradiction. In fact, 14% of the parents/guardians in Durga Bhagwati and 27% of the parents/guardians in Rajpur whose daughter or son recently married thought that most child marriages in their communities took place to reduce the dowry needed for young girls. These findings are consistent with previous evidence from a separate qualitative study performed by the R-CEFM Project in Madhesh Pradesh, which showed that social prestige was a main reason for child marriage.

Overall, this assessment provides an overview of the situation of child and early marriage in two municipalities of Rautahat district in Madhesh Province. Through hands-on mentoring and collaboration with municipality stakeholders, the successful implementation of these local-level data initiatives in municipalities across Madhesh Province demonstrates the ability for high-quality local data on CEFM to be collected to inform municipality programming. Technical assistance focused on training and orientation on critical aspects of study design and implementation, including research ethics, digital data collection, and quality control. The transfer of these skills will enable local evidence generation on CEFM and related issues to continue routinely at the municipality level in the future.

These findings will be used by the municipalities to inform future action plans to reduce CEFM in these areas. The findings provide evidence necessary for further advocacy to address CEFM, suggest audiences with whom to work to address CEFM, and identify intentions and attitudes related to CEFM among parents/guardians. Furthermore, they provide necessary local-level evidence of child and early marriage that the municipality can use to monitor over time. Local child rights committees and ward child rights committees can be mobilized to build on this momentum to collect data periodically to maintain an up-to-date picture of CEFM rates at the local level. Data from this initial census should be compared over time to examine trends in CEFM rates at the local level. The skills developed and reinforced through this local-level evidence generation initiative can be adapted by municipalities to facilitate rapid data collection on other local-level priorities related to health and social development.

Annex 1: Classification of Social Groups in Nepal

Main Caste/Ethnic and Religious Groups	Caste/Ethnic and Religious Groups in Nepal
Dalits	Hill Dalit: Gandharva (Gaine), Pariyar (Damai, Darji, Suchikar, Nagarchi, Dholi, Hudke), Badi, Bishwokarma (Kami, Lohar, Sunar, Odha, Chunara, Parki, Tamata), Sarki (Mijar, Charmkar, Bhul), Unidentified Dalits
	Madheshi Dalit: Chamar, Musahar, Dushad/Paswan, Tatma, Khatwe, Dhobi, Bantar, Chidimar, Dom, Halkhor (Kalar, Kakaihiya, Kori, Pasi, Mestar, Sarwanga, Patharkata)
Janajati	Newar: All Newar
	Hill/Mountain Janajati: Magar, Chhantyal, Rai, Sherpa, Bhujel/Gharti, Yakha, Thakali, Limbu, Lapcha/Rong, Bhotte, Byansi/Sauka, Jirel, Yholmo, Walung, Gurung, Dura, Tamang, Kumal, Sunuwar, Majhi, Danuwar, Thami/Thangmi, Darai, Bote, Baramu, Pahari, Hayu, Kusunda, Chepang, Raji, Raute
	Other Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (FEFIN) listed names to be added after Terai/Hill classification: Bankariya, Surel, Siyar, Lohami, Thudam, Jagad, Topkegola, Dolpo, Fri, Mugal, Lorke, Lohpa, Chairotan, Tangbe, Tingaule, Thakali, Barhagaule, Marfali Thakal
Other Madheshi/Terai Caste	Other Madheshi/Terai Caste: Kuswaha, Kurmi, Kumhar, Kahar, Kewat, Kanu, Kalwar, Teli, Nuniya, Baniya, Bhediyar, Mali, Mallah, Worai, Yadav, Rajbhar, Rajdhob, Lohar, Lodha, Sudhi, Saini, Sonar, Haluwai, Hazam, Amaat, Kewarat, Barnamala, Jogiya, Bing, Beldar, Kalabaj, Bot, Badhai, Turuha, Chanai
Muslim	Muslim: Madheshi Muslim, Churoute (Hill Muslim)
Brahman/Chhetri	Hill Brahman: All Hill Brahman
	Hill Chhetri: Chhetri, Thakuri, Sanyasi
	Madheshi Brahman/Chhetri: Madheshi Brahman, Nurang, Rajput, Kayastha (Bhumihar)
Others	Other: Marwari, Jain, Bengali, Punjabi/Sikh, Unidentified Others

Source: The 2001 Nepal Census. Note, names in parentheses are alternative categories of caste/ethnic/religious groups.