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# The Social Institution and Inscription of Child Marriage in the Terai Region of Nepal

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Spring 2015

केटी मधेसीमा, महिला मधेसीमा,  
Kēṭī Madhēsīmaa, Mahilā Madhēsīmaa

The Social Institution and Inscription of Child Marriage  
in the Terai Region of Nepal



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## **Abstract:**

Marriage is typically considered to be one of the foundations of the family unit, and family is thought to be one of the pillars of society. Because marriage is such a primary social concept, its forms and functions may be taken for granted, despite the fact that it is culturally dependent. For example, the idea that one must be in love in order to get married may be more cultural ideal than universal idea—and is thus not true of many cultures. Arranged marriages are still performed in many parts of the world, and can be means of building kinship circles and economic ties, rather than serving as declarations of cultivated, romantic love.

While the reasons for marriage may be negotiable, certain human rights regarding marriage are not. In some regions, including South Asia, marriages are often arranged between children, a status typically defined as people under the age of eighteen. In Nepal, the numbers of girls married off before they become legal adults, or before they even hit puberty are still fairly staggering, despite the practice being declared illegal since 1963, more than 50 years ago. Certain arguments in favor of child brides are that it is an important cultural practice, or that a girl is safer from sexual predators if she is married. However, the reality of premature marriages is that the girls are subject to many health issues, including psychological ones, lose prospects of education, and often times, the husbands prove to be their sexual assaulters anyway.

Further problematizing the practice is the fact that not all children are equally at risk. Girls do typically marry younger than boys, though both genders are susceptible to child marriage. If a girl is from a particular region, religion, ethnic group, or caste, her probability of being married early will also rise, often because of economic considerations of the dowry. Considering the myriad factors that influence the practice of child marriage in Nepal, as well as the proven inadequacy of the law, it is important to locate and frame the practice within the cultures in which it exists. With that said, one must question where the practice exists the most, why it exists there the most, and to what extent the practice of child marriage is a symptom of a larger dynamic of gender inequality. After spending time in the Terai, where the practice is the most common, it is my opinion that child marriage would not persist if it were not for the pervasiveness of practices such as the dowry, the unequal emphasis of marriage for women, and the practice of the daughter moving into the husband's family's home, all of which strengthen the existing patriarchy and prevent local girls from becoming self-determined.

## METHODOLOGY

I conducted my research during April of 2015 in the Lumbini Zone. Since Lumbini is home to many small villages and settlements, as well as an international tourist destination, I knew I would have access both to modern amenities such as Internet and clean water, as well as people who had experienced child marriage personally, so I decided to stay there. Except for the first few days, which I spent living in the nearby Siddhartha Guest House, I stayed at the Peace Grove Institute, a school and nunnery for girls of Nepal. The Peace Grove Institute, the adjacent Karuna Girls College, and the affiliated Metta Schools are grassroots educational institutions all started by Guruji Maittreya, in efforts to improve local education, especially for girls.

Due to the lack of English education of many of the locals, interpreters were essential in conducting research with villagers, and due to the sensitivity of the topic, female interpreters were needed in order to interview fellow women. What is even more, the people in this area speak local languages such as Awadhi, Bhojpuri, and Urdu rather than Nepali, further requiring local collaborators. The nuns at Peace Grove Institute thus became my translators and informants as well. As the majority of the nuns were from nearby villages, I was able to interview them about their lives, and some of them were able to take me into their villagers and meet their family members and community members as well. I would also go to the Karuna Girls School and speak with English classes, in order to ask the students in focus groups their thoughts on child marriage. As much is lost in translation, I supplemented these interviews with observations on how girls acted in and out of class, the roles of women in their homes and in their villages, and plenty of secondary research. I also attended two local weddings, one of which took place between a groom and a sixteen year old girl.

I asked questions about their family lives, daily schedules, community gossip, and plans for the future. Some examples are, "What do you plan to do after school?" "When would you like to get married?" "What changed in your daily schedule after marriage?" "How did your husband's family treat you?" And, "What is the current ritual for widows?"

In the actual Lumbini area, other than the schools where I was staying, there were no NGO offices or governmental offices in operation. I thus interviewed teachers and administrators at these schools, and traveled to the district capital, Bhairahawa, in order to conduct interviews with officials such as police and Women's Development Government Officers.

I tried to use a male translator at one point, when the nuns were particularly busy, and it didn't go so well... While his English was great, his opinions on how to treat an American woman were not, and he spoke to me in a way that was not entirely respectful. I thus had to remove the interviews that he had translated, though the experience itself gave me insight into how women can be gendered in the male gaze in the region. I would be happy to speak about this experience further in private conversations.

## **Acknowledgements**

First, I would like to thank everyone who supported my pursuit of this research topic—the SIT staff, (especially Nazneen, who fielded all of my neurotic questions), my Advisor, Ola Perczynska, and my family and friends. I know how sensitive this topic can be, and at times when my own nerves got the best of me, it was your confidence and kind words that encouraged me to keep trucking.

An enormous “thank you” to the Peace Grove Institute family, who provided me with so much more than a bed in which to sleep. I could thank each of you individually for speaking to me and helping me to feel welcome in your home. This would not have been possible without you, and I hope you continue to do the great work that you are doing for a long time to come.

Finally, I have learned that when traveling alone in a country where I do not speak the language, being able to trust people is of the utmost importance. That being said, I must thank all the people who, along the way, nudged me when it was my stop on the bus, gave me directions to places I pointed to on my map, or told me that the water in the water bottle wasn’t actually “bottled water”. They are as much the reason for me actually completing my research and paper as anyone.



## **INTRODUCTION**

How does one characterize ‘Nepal’? In many ways, Nepal is known for its status of liminality: geopolitically, it occupies a crucial point in the border between the global superpowers of India and the Tibetan Autonomous Region, now part of China. Religiously, it is home to many pilgrimage sites for Buddhists and Hindus, but is also home to many Muslims and people of indigenous religions. Linguistically, while Nepali is the national language, it is primarily spoken by less than 50% of the population. Nepal is both known for its low human development ranking, as well as its status as a global tourist destination. Home to both the tallest mountains in the world as well as a large, tropical region only a few hundred meters above sea level, not even its climate can be generalized. All things considered, when discussing a people or custom in a country comprised of 75 districts spread out across 14 administrative zones, three geographical belts, and five development regions, in order to strive for accuracy, one cannot generalize.

Instead, one must localize a practice within its specific culture. One practice that Nepal is known for is that of child marriage. While this “tradition” has been banned in the country since 1963, it is still widely practiced. In fact, the International Center for Research on Women has ranked Nepal as the country where child marriage is the 19<sup>th</sup> most prevalent, with 41% married under the age of 18, following certain countries in Africa and South Asia.<sup>1</sup> While these generalized statistics from international organizations succeed in proving how widespread such practices are in the country, because of the way that they homogenize Nepal’s population, they do not succeed as much in attempting to capture some image of the practice in Nepal as a whole. Thus, considering Nepal’s great diversity, what are these statistics really meant to reveal?

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<sup>1</sup> "Child Marriage Facts and Figures." International Center for Research on Women. Accessed March 22, 2015. <http://www.icrw.org/child-marriage-facts-and-figures>.

First of all, it is important to know that child marriage is not equally practiced across the entire country. Specifically, the tropical zone in Nepal on the southern border known as the Terai is where the average age of marriage is the lowest at 17.2 years old, as compared to the mountainous and hilly regions. For example, in Rupandehi, a district in the western Terai, some statistics state that over half of the marriages that take place involve girls under the age of 12, and almost 90 per cent of marriages involve girls under the age of 18.<sup>2</sup> In the book *Minorities and Indigenous Peoples of Nepal* the author, Krishna B. Bhattachan states that Madhesi (another word for the Terai) Dalit women are victims of regional, cultural, and linguistic discrimination, in addition to class and gender discrimination.<sup>3</sup> He posits that the reason for the regional, cultural, and linguistic discrimination dates back to the Muluki Ain of 1854, since in “unifying” Nepal, this code essentially declared one particular language and culture dominant within Nepal, marginalizing many indigenous communities in the process. Factors such as the monarchy, the patriarchal system, a culture of male chauvinism, lack of protection from violence against women, and the media’s use of women as a commodity perpetuate the system of gender discrimination.

In making sense of all these different types of discrimination and difference, it is useful to turn to a term coined by Kimberle Crenshaw in “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color”.<sup>4</sup> In it, she states, “Where systems of race, gender, and class discrimination converge...intervention strategies based solely on the experiences of women who do not share the same class or race backgrounds will be of limited help to women who because of race and class face different obstacles.” In the case of Nepal’s child marriage, what this means is that because the women of the Terai are not from the hills, their native tongue is not Nepali, and they are not from the dominant Kathmandu-centered culture of Nepal, many campaigns meant to improve women’s condition within Nepal and prevent child marriage will not fully help them.

Crenshaw goes on to state, “Intersectional subordination need not be intentionally produced; in fact, it is frequently the consequence of the imposition of one burden that interacts with preexisting vulnerabilities to create yet another dimension of disempowerment.” Here, she points out the added dimension of difficulty when different types of discrimination are heaped upon an individual, and uses her seminal term, “intersectional”. The idea behind this term is that there are different axes of privilege and discrimination, and people often do not fit simply on a single one, but rather at an intersection of two or more, like the women of the Madhesi. Thus, in considering the practice of child marriage, one must consider each of these axes, and how they interact; one must look not only at what it means to be a woman, but what it means to be a woman in a particular region, a particular caste, speaking a particular language, and familiar with a particular culture.

Many different local communities of people participate in child marriage—it is not solely relegated to a single religion or ethnic group. Within the Rupandehi District of the Terai, primarily, Muslim and Hindu communities engage in the practice, and Dalits, the

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<sup>2</sup> Perczynska, Aleksandra, and Daniel Coyle. "Child Marriage as a Health Issue – Nepal Case Study." Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights. Accessed April 18, 2015. <http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Children/Study/RightHealth/HerTurn.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Bhattachan, Krishna Bahadur. *Minorities & Indigenous Peoples of Nepal*. Kathmandu: National Coalition Against Racial Discrimination, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> [http://socialdifference.columbia.edu/files/socialdiff/projects/Article\\_Mapping\\_the\\_Margins\\_by\\_Kimblere\\_Crenshaw.pdf](http://socialdifference.columbia.edu/files/socialdiff/projects/Article_Mapping_the_Margins_by_Kimblere_Crenshaw.pdf)



“untouchable” caste are the most vulnerable for early marriage. In addition, Chomar, Harijdn, and Tharu communities participate in this practice. To humanize the women who have experienced or are at risk of child marriage, and to make sure they are not homogenized into a single statistic, one must consider the particular culture, speak with local people individually, and ask certain questions. Why is it that some are more vulnerable for child marriage than others? What does it mean to be a woman in the Terai? And, to what extent is child marriage a symptom of a larger dynamic of gender discrimination in this particular culture? In general, perhaps the most useful conceptual tool when considering child marriage is the recognition of interconnectivity—just as these axes of difference intersect for the lives of certain women, so too do they intersect within a culture. Child marriage is not an isolated issue, and thus by necessity must be considered in conjunction with other cultural norms and practices.

### **THE TERA**



Nepal is famous for being home to the highest mountain range in the world, with some mountains reaching over 8000 meters, though it is also home to a tropical/subtropical climate, which reaches merely a few hundred meters above sea level. The country is thus split into three regions that cut across the country lengthwise, and are determined based upon levels of elevation: the mountainous area, the hilly area, and the Terai lowlands, also known as the Madhesi. While the Terai accounts for only 23% of the total land in the country, it accounts for 88% of the total fertile land. Despite the fact that the Terai has the large majority of fertile land in the country, 33% of the population of the

Terai faces severe food insecurity, meaning that they are only food secure<sup>5</sup> for between zero and six months out of the year. In comparison, the hilly region is the largest and contains 42% of the total land, 10% of the fertile land, yet there is less severe food insecurity, at 28%.<sup>6</sup> This shows a lack of infrastructure and poor planning of resource usage in the Terai.

Besides food insecurity, the people of the Terai have faced other problems within the country of Nepal. For example, after King Prithvinaryan Shah conquered and “united” the area in 1769, the residents of the Terai still had to obtain visas in order to visit Kathmandu during the autocratic Rana rule. To this day, the people of the Terai have low governmental representation in the cabinet, parliament, and political parties, as well as hardly any representation in the army, civil service, or judiciary bodies. While all are part of the same country, the people of the hills sometimes stereotype the people of the Terai as “Indians”.<sup>7</sup> Even travel books such as the “Rough Guide” to Nepal state that the Terai is “pervaded” by “an unmistakable Indian quality”.<sup>8</sup> Some cite this “Indian quality” as a source for the Terai’s issues of gender discrimination. On the ICRW’s list of countries where child marriage is the most present, India was number 13, with a 47 per cent prevalence, and India has also made global headlines in recent years for some very high profile rape cases. Still, scholars must be wary of this line of dialogue, as it risks homogenizing India and also risks feeding the dialogue that the Terai region is “Indian” and thus, in some way, less Nepali.

In general though, there are many customs that transcend the border between the two countries. The Terai is home to many of Nepal’s indigenous cultures, which speak languages spoken in the bordering Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, such as Awadhi, Bhojpuri, and the Muslim language of Urdu. Nepali is thus usually taught in schools rather than in the home. Most of the local women wear traditional garments like saris, but some Muslim women wear Hijabs or even Niqabs, which cover everything but their eyes, as well.

The primary mode of transportation in the village areas is bicycling. However, women typically ride on the backs of the bicycles and motorbikes in a sidesaddle fashion. While some of the homes are rectilinear, cement, and painted, alike to those found in Kathmandu or Pokhara, many of the other homes are made of mud and straw. Recently, in Rupandehi there have been more societal changes due to the development of the Maya Devi Temple and surrounding Lumbini Development Trust. While before there were very few schools in the area, few restaurants, and almost no hotels, education is now becoming more important, a large tourist market is growing, and some people are migrating down from the hills and other like regions in search of jobs. Similarly, the age of marriage is slowly increasing here, though it still holds the title of having the highest incidence of child marriage in the nation.

According to data collected in 2006, the average age for marriage in the hills is 18, in the mountains it is 17.8, and in the Terai it is 17.2. While this difference may seem negligible, considering the large sample size, it is significant. Some sources say that in certain districts of the Terai, including Rupandehi, Dhanusha, and Mahottari, over 50% of

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<sup>5</sup> NGOs define “food security” as “the sufficiency of food produced on one’s own land or the adequacy, availability, and accessibility of food. A household is considered food secure when its dwellers do not live in hunger or fear of starvation.”

<sup>6</sup> “Child Marriage in Nepal | World Vision International.” World Vision International. 2012. Accessed March 11, 2015.

<http://www.wvi.org/nepal/publication/child-marriage-nepal>.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid Bhattachan.

<sup>8</sup> “The Western Terai Guide | Nepal Travel.” The Western Terai Guide. Accessed April 13, 2015.

marriages include girls under 12. Another way of considering these statistics is to look at the percentage of girls ages 10-14 married: out of Nepal's 75 districts, in 1991, 11 of these districts had 11% or more girls aged 10-14 who were married, and all 11 districts were within the Terai.<sup>9</sup> According to local sources in Lumbini, the average age for girls to marry is about 14 or 15, after which they will move into their husband's homes around 18. For boys, the average age is closer to 23 or 25. The Dalits, or the people of the untouchable caste, are the most susceptible to child marriage, and 87% of Terai Dalits are married before the age of 19. This fact reiterates Crenshaw's idea of intersectionality, and shows that within the Terai, there is still great socioeconomic diversity where different castes are differently vulnerable to child marriage.

### **HOW TO DEFINE "CHILD MARRIAGE", AND HOW TO STUDY IT**



#### How to Define Child Marriage

In defining child marriage, one must consider each term separately: what defines a "child" and what defines a "marriage". The definition of "child" is generally understood to mean under the age of 18, however this in itself is a somewhat subjective and arbitrary ruling. One must look at how this number is being defined—often, 18 is the age denoted by law, and does not necessarily correlate with social life. Some secondary schools end at age 18, but others end at different times, or consider the final years of school to be optional. Furthermore, age in itself is measured differently: depending upon one's country of birth, a baby is born either at age zero or age one. In East Asian countries, babies are usually

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<sup>9</sup> Thapa, Shyam. "Girl Child Marriage in Nepal: Its Prevalence and Correlates." Cambridge Himalayan Studies. Accessed May 1, 2015. [http://himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collections/journals/contributions/pdf/CNAS\\_23\\_02\\_01.pdf](http://himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collections/journals/contributions/pdf/CNAS_23_02_01.pdf).

declared one year old at birth, and turn a year older on each solar New Year. Thus, eighteen for some is really seventeen for others.

The concept of “marriage” is often taken for granted as the foundation of the family, and thus, the foundation of society. However, in actuality the definition of marriage varies from culture to culture. According to Stephanie Coontz, author of *Marriage, A History*, marrying for love only became popular around two centuries ago. As she puts it, “In many cultures, love has been seen as a desirable outcome of marriage but not as a good reason for getting married in the first place.”<sup>10</sup> Some of the characteristics of “romantic marriage” are that it upholds the individual’s ability to choose and the individual’s emotions. The downside is that sometimes these emotions change, leading to shorter-term engagements. Because of the emphasis on the individual, social cohesion can sometimes be threatened. In contrast, “pragmatic marriages” are marriages decided upon by families, parents, religious leaders, or other groups of people besides the two immediately involved individuals. This includes arranged marriage. Pragmatic marriages are usually considered to be traditional, adhere to the morals of the societies in which they are enacted, and beneficial for the families involved. Furthermore, very few of these marriages end in divorce, though often transitioning to married life proves more difficult for the individuals.

In one of Merriam Webster’s dictionary definition of marriage, it follows, “the state of being united to a person of the opposite sex as husband or wife in a consensual and contractual relationship recognized by law”.<sup>11</sup> Newly, such definitions have been amended in order to include same sex marriages, which shows how traditional conceptions of marriage are being challenged in all cultures, and also that the western conception of marriage is not immune from human rights violations either.

It follows that marriage is also made official through different means: similar to age, marriage is usually legally defined, though such laws are not always translated socially. One might obtain marriage license or marriage registration. However, in many cases marriage is more of an understood social contract than a formal, state sanctioned union. Marriage is often defined religiously as well. Furthermore, child marriage is actually illegal in most countries, so it is even more rarely officially registered, and can be especially hard to prosecute. In official censuses and reports on child marriage, organizations rarely clarify to which marriage they are referring, which can be cause for confusion.

Marriage in general is not defined by the two individuals in the Terai. In fact, Rima Gupta, the Child Marriage Officer in the Rupandehi district stated that in the region, marriage is more about the relation of two parents. It signifies a bond between two families. It is about individuals insofar as it is about their respective lifelong commitments to each other, which is further evidenced by the fact that there is almost no divorce. However, she also admitted that in early marriages, domestic violence is often more likely, which can then lead to an argument between the two families. Furthermore, if parents force a girl to marry but she resists, a wedge can form between the parents and child.<sup>12</sup>

According to a focus group of a 10<sup>th</sup> grade English class at the Karuna Girls College, child marriage can be decided upon by different members of the family. Once girls

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<sup>10</sup> Thapa, Shyam. "Girl Child Marriage in Nepal: Its Prevalence and Correlates." Cambridge Himalayan Studies. Accessed May 1, 2015. [http://himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collections/journals/contributions/pdf/CNAS\\_23\\_02\\_01.pdf](http://himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collections/journals/contributions/pdf/CNAS_23_02_01.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> "Marriage." *Merriam-Webster.com*. Merriam-Webster, n.d. Web. 10 May 2015. <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/marriage>>.

<sup>12</sup> Interview, April 15, Women’s Development Organization, Bhairahawa, 1pm

are married, that does not necessarily mean that the girl must drop out of school. In fact, some of the girls in the focus group were already married. In general, all said their parents would decide the marriage. One girl who was already married said that it was her father's decision. All of the girls said that their ideal ages for marriage would be between the ages of twenty and twenty-seven. However, as their English teacher pointed out, this is actually impossible, and most of them, if not all of them, will be married before then.<sup>13</sup>

In the case of Hindu marriage within Nepal's Terai region, there are actually two marriages. The first marriage is when the bride and groom meet and have a ceremony with their family and friends. Sometimes, the children won't even know that they are to be married until the day before or even the day of the wedding. The age of the girl for this used to be twelve but is increasing slowly, and is now around fifteen. After this, the bride is considered to be "married", however she returns to her family's home and often continues to go to school just as before. Three, five, or seven years later (as dictated by the Hindu religion), she will then move into the house of her husband and her husband's family somewhere between the ages of sixteen and nineteen.<sup>14</sup> She will then be encouraged to give birth quickly, which is why child marriage often leads to early child bearing as well.

The age at both marriages typically depends upon caste, as those of lower castes may marry as soon as eight and move in as soon as twelve. Additionally, those of higher castes often have more options when deciding when to move their daughters into the husband's homes after the first marriage.

Child marriages can also be love marriages; however, this practice is far more common in the cities than the villages. Also, this practice usually occurs through eloping rather than the full, formal ceremony, as it is often against the wishes of the parents.<sup>15</sup> In fact, parents will usually caution against or forbid boyfriends and girlfriends before the age of 16, and will sometimes even report the children to the police themselves if they think the two will get married without their parent's permission. Relationships before marriage are primarily blamed on the girls. Some teenagers do have relationships; they just keep these relationships in secret, since if others find out they might try to put a stop to them. They will then end their relationship before marriage, as there are almost no love marriages.

Some of the girls at the Karuna Girls College spoke about love marriage, and some knew of some couples who had done it. One girl's uncle and aunt had dated, then their courtship had been supported, and the parents had then arranged for the marriage. For another girl, her father and mother were even a love match. But, for the most part, they said that love marriages weren't a success, and emphasized that no intercultural love marriages could happen in their society. Another girl said that she knew a divorced woman in Kathmandu, and that the divorced life was very hard for her.

For the purpose of this research, child marriage is defined as the social recognition of two individuals being reserved for each other in marriage before the age of 18. This aligns with most official definitions.

### How to Study Child Marriage

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<sup>13</sup> Focus Group, April 21, Karuna Girls' College, Lumbini, 12pm

<sup>14</sup> Interview April 17, Peace Grove Institute, Lumbini, 8:00pm

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, Interview at Peace Grove Institute

According to the International Center for Research on Women, the country with the largest percentage of girls married before the age of 18 is Niger with 75%, followed by Chad and the Central African Republic at 68%, Bangladesh at 66%, and Guinea at 63%. Out of their list of twenty countries, fifteen are in Africa, two are in Latin America, and three are in South Asia. Besides Bangladesh, India has the thirteenth most incidents of child marriage at 47% and Nepal is tied for the seventeenth to nineteenth most incidents with the Dominican Republic, Ethiopia, and Nicaragua at 41%. In general, marriage exists mostly within more impoverished communities and in developing nations.

Accounts of exactly how much child marriage occurs in Nepal vary, however. For example, according to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 51% of the Nepalese population is married as children, and in women, the percentage is even larger: Nepal's 2006 Demographic and Health Survey found that 60% of Nepalese women between the ages of 20 to 49 were married as children.<sup>16</sup> (This percentage would probably be even higher with a larger age group, as the average age of marriage is slower getting older as time progresses.)

The discrepancies in reported numbers point out the difficulty in defining and measuring child marriage. Besides the difficulty due to unregistered marriages, the lack of defining whether the first or second marriage is indicated, and the lack of clarity regarding the age, there is the added fact that families who know that child marriage is illegal will often lie to census takers. Rima Gupta, the Child Marriage Officer for the Rupandehi District stated that knowledgeable officials can tell when an individual is lying about child marriage sometimes if they have a sindoor, or a powder marking above the Tika that denotes marriage on their foreheads. This thus further points out the importance of local knowledge in order to gain a comprehensive understanding even of the prevalence of such a practice.<sup>17</sup>

Child marriage in Nepal is a social practice, as well as an assemblage. "Assemblage theory" is attributed to 20<sup>th</sup> century French philosopher Gilles Deleuze who says of assemblages, "Assemblages exist, but they indeed have component parts that serve as criteria and allow the various assemblages to be qualified. Just as in painting, assemblages are a bunch of lines. But there are all kinds of lines. Some lines are segments, or segmented; some lines get caught in a rut, or disappear into 'black holes'; some are destructive, sketching death; and some lines are vital and creative..." He summarizes this complex statement when he says, "But an assemblage is first and foremost what keeps very heterogeneous elements together: e.g. a sound, a gesture, a position, etc., both natural and artificial elements."<sup>18</sup> In effect, the definition of an assemblage is a web of relations of different, heterogeneous components. Each relation is different, as illustrated by Deleuze's analogy of the different lines that exist.

By applying the assemblage theory to the practice of child marriage in Nepal, one is able to consider child marriage as a more complex, non-static phenomenon, rather than one that is linear and confined. In questioning why child marriage exists with such frequency in this area, there is no simple answer. Traditionally, religion has encouraged

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<sup>16</sup> Ingber, Hanna. "Early Marriage Precludes Education for Young Nepalis." Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting. November 1, 2011. Accessed April 13, 2015. <http://pulitzercenter.org/reporting/nepal-early-marriage-prevention-education-women>.

<sup>17</sup> Interview April 15, Women's Development Office, Bhairahawa, 1:00pm

<sup>18</sup> Smith, Daniel. "Gilles Deleuze." Stanford University. May 23, 2008. Accessed May 9, 2015. <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/deleuze/>.

child marriage, there are inadequate health resources, the dowry system often reinforces the system of child marriage for families of lower castes, which in turn implicates socioeconomic status, and inadequate social mobility. Each aspect depends and incites other aspects in different proportions, proving that the discussion of child marriage cannot be engaged in terms of binaries or linear structures; rather, assemblage theory is required.



### **WHAT'S THE HARM?**

There exists an anthropological theory known as “cultural relativity”, which essentially puts forth that no cultural practice is any worse or better than any other cultural practice. While initially this seems like a theory that would help to eliminate bias and exceptionalism, the danger with such a theory is that it calls into question the idea of universal human rights. This is an important theory to consider when regarding the practice of child marriage. The idea that marriage is something that happens between two individuals in love after they have completed their schooling and after they have dated and gotten to know one another is, for the most part, a modern western ideal that has only just started to spread globally.

In many other cultures, marriage is not a formal display of two individuals “being in love”, but is rather a social contract between two families. Polyandry, arranged marriages, dowries, child marriage, bride-napping—people from different cultures all over the world still engage in these such practices every day. For example, T.D. Allman, a prior Peace Corps Volunteer states in his National Geographic article, *A Town in Nepal Teaches a Young American How to Live*, that in a conversation with then prince, the prince stated, “Oh, you Occidentals and your love matches! When you marry, your love is like a vat of boiling water. As soon as you get married, you take the water off the heat. Everything cools off,

whereas our arranged marriages are like pots of cold water. When we marry, the pot is put on to the heat, so year by year it gets hotter.”<sup>19</sup> Nepalese people in Bhairahawa agreed, in fact, even Rima Gupta, the Child Marriage Officer of Rupandehi’s Women Development Office, had an arranged marriage. She stated similarly that the biggest difference was just that in an arranged marriage, love comes after the ceremony. While this viewpoint comes from a woman who was able to complete her university education at Tribhuvan University in Kathmandu and now held a job in public office, (quite a feat for a woman, especially in the Terai), her story still is a testimony to how different ideas of marriage are not necessarily “bad” or “wrong”.<sup>20</sup>

It is thus evident that in challenging the practice of child marriage, one must be aware of which aspect in particular they are challenging. To argue that it is a right to marry someone who one is in love with is perhaps a western bias. However, after learning of some of the health issues that occur with child marriage, of the heightened risk of violence against women, and of the inequality in the right to self-determination, it is fair to say that child marriage is a human rights issue, and that it is a custom that needs to change. As Perczynska points out in points out in her article, “Child Marriage as a Health Issue: Nepal Case Study”, according to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, all children have the right to education (article 28), to be protected from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, including sexual abuse (Article 28), and to be protected from all forms of exploitation affecting any aspect of the child’s welfare, (Article 36), including sexual exploitation (Article 34), and the right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health (Article 24).<sup>21</sup> Child marriage violates many of these rights, as I will begin to examine here, and will attempt to prove more in depth in the upcoming sections.

## **DAILY LIFE**



<sup>19</sup> Allman, T.D. "A Town in Nepal Teaches a Young American How to Live." National Geographic. April 12, 2015. Accessed April 16, 2015. <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/2015/04/150412-nepal-nepalganj-peace-corps-tallman-untouchables-ngmytown/>.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, Interview WDO

<sup>21</sup> Ibid Perczynska, Aleksandra, and Daniel Coyle.



Before marriage, the daily life for girls varies. For many, their average day might not be so different from that of their brother's. When kids are young, they all play together, and it is only after they turn twelve that girls and boys are supposed to keep more separate lives. Girls begin housework in their teen years, while boys play outside. While some young girls go to school, others are required to stay home to continue their housework or take care of kids. Even the girls who do get to attend school are not sent to boarding school, however, and so it is only boys who have this access to better educations. Parents don't feel the need to send their daughters to receive higher education because their daughters won't even be staying with them, they will be moving into their husband's family's homes. Which girls have more access to education is not necessarily dependent on caste. Additionally, the average family varies. While it is rare to have no boy children, such families do exist in the area. In Nepal's Terai, family means not only that you live with them, but also that there is a responsibility to care and support them.<sup>22</sup>

Even the girls at the Karuna school, who are getting good educations and whose parents then must value education sufficiently, have full slates of chores to do when they get home from school. Besides studying, they must also cook, clean rooms, do laundry, and do work in the fields. Out of a class of ten, two mentioned relaxing and games when speaking about their after-school-activities, and all mentioned various chores.<sup>23</sup>

After marriage, the new wife moves into her husband's home as a late teenager. With no experience, she goes to a new place with a new person. The girl or woman is often discouraged from leaving her home, as those around her fear she can become pregnant by another man. She spends her time doing household chores, like cooking, washing clothes and dishes, looking after babies or older parents, caring for the animals, and working in the fields. Sometimes, when women are pregnant, they still continue to work in the fields, which can be extremely dangerous both to their health and to the baby's. Other times, in the beginning of the marriage, she has trouble with her husband's family. They don't always understand her struggle in being in this new environment. While the new wife takes care of the cooking, cleaning, and caring for everyone, she often isn't allowed to make any household decisions. She cannot explain her own ideas or experiences, and rarely does her new family make a conscious effort to help make her feel comfortable in her new home. She is not supposed to explain herself or question her condition, only listen to orders and do work. Such women often become wiser as time goes on, so that by the time they are grandmas they understand their situation much more and are able to enunciate their emotions.<sup>24</sup>

Anjuli, one of the other Gurumas at the Peace Grove Institute discussed her village, Mahilwar, also known as Buddhanagar. She stated that the village people are primarily occupied by farming, though that new hotels are cropping up. Even so, these hotels are usually operated by people who come from outside; after the inception of the Lumbini Development Trust, people began to see Lumbini as a good area for professional investment, and many people came down from the hills to open and operate the hotels.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Interview at the Gautam Nun's Monastery, April 16, 8:30am

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, Focus Group.

<sup>24</sup> Interview, April 22, 2015; Mahilwar, Lumbini, 2:00pm, home of Subhanti Jha

<sup>25</sup> Interview, April 17, 2015; Lumbini, 8:00pm, Peace Grove Institute.

As of yet, there are very few jobs and opportunities for women outside of the home. As it stands, Rima, the Rupandehi Child Marriage Officer stated that good jobs for women are considered to be teaching at boarding schools, and working at NGOs, which will often make it a priority to hire women. Many of the young girls who had continued access to education expressed further interest in becoming nurses and doctors.<sup>26</sup>

Subhanti Jha, a forty-five year old mother in Mahilwar was married at ten years old, and moved into her husband's home at the age of 16. Her husband actually did not live with his parents, only his brother, so she did not have to learn how to live with in-laws. Her brother-in-law and husband would go out to make money, while the women in the house would work. After her children had matured a bit, she attended a training to learn how to make handicrafts. She now can make wall art, bowls, and vases out of local materials like straw, bamboo, and dye, and even trains other women to make these goods, which then get sold in Kathmandu, Pokhara, and Nepalganj. Despite this, she maintains that her enjoyment in this craft is not because of the business, but rather about her self-fulfillment and self-sufficiency.

Some of her art includes words in English or Nepali that she has cut out of straw mats, even though she never went to school herself. She learned through her children, whom she ensured would get education, and would copy their letters. Her daughter is now a novice nun at the Peace Grove Institute, and Subhanti promises her that she can marry when she would like, and that she can pursue her education to the fullest. Even though some people in the villages think bad things about the girls who go to school, she realizes the importance of her daughter receiving the same education as her three brothers will. Still though, she will give a dowry with her marriage.<sup>27</sup>

As education becomes more important for girls, after graduating from 12<sup>th</sup> grade, young women are starting to pursue higher education as well. One might look at the students at the Karuna College for Girls in the town of Lumbini in the Rupandehi district for a case study. While some of the girls are already married, and most of the other girls will get married soon after finishing schools, some will actually continue on to bachelor's studies. A fortunate few may be able to attend schools in Kathmandu, depending upon their parents. Karuna College for Girls is part of the Peace Grove Institute in Lumbini, where local girls live and study under Buddhist Gurumas. These girls can thus be ensured of an education and protected from becoming child brides. States Guruma Soma, while the local daughters are married off, "We are free."<sup>28</sup>

The Peace Grove Institute is an example of a new option that has been recently made available to local girls since the inception of the Lumbini Development Trust and the surrounding monasteries. The Peace Grove Institute and the Gautam Nun Monastery are both local institutions that admit local girls to be trained in Buddhist philosophy and gain educations while practicing as Novice Nuns. Girls will often live at these nunneries and leave their family homes as young as eight or nine. The daily schedule begins at five in the morning with a chant and meditation. Afterwards, these girls lead fairly typical lives, eating, studying, attending schools, and talking with their friends.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid Interview WDO

<sup>27</sup> Interview, April 22, 2015; Mahilwar, Lumbini, 2:00pm, home of Subhanti Jha

<sup>28</sup> Interview at the Peace Grove Institute, April 15, 2015, 11:30am

## RELIGION



While many residents of Rupandehi affirmed that all religions and all ethnic groups take part in child marriage, certain religions have child marriage incorporated into their doctrine, while others are less explicit. Rather than delve into religious doctrine, I have decided instead to focus on the retold explanations of the religious foundations for child marriage. Many cite a Hindu belief that it is better to marry girls off before menstruation. The doctrine is that if a girl is married before menstruation, the gods will bless her family.<sup>29</sup> There is also thus a conflict between religious law and state law. The result of this is that many of the people who believe unequivocally in their religions wind up disobeying the law, while some have been educated on the dangers and downsides of child marriage and recognize that some Hindu traditions can change.

An interesting dynamic has emerged in Lumbini as the Buddhist presence in the region grows. Because Hinduism is a religion that believes both in child marriage and in the primacy of the caste system, some individuals, especially women, are turning to Buddhism in order to avoid child marriage and other plights of low socioeconomic status. One can see at the Gautam Nun's Monastery or the Peace Grove Institute the scars on the nostrils of the girls, from when they joined these nunneries and removed their (traditionally Hindu) nose piercings. Deepa, an example of a girl who was born into a poor, Hindu family and became a Buddhist nun stated that there are more misunderstandings in Hinduism rather than Buddhism because in Hinduism, people just trust their religion without questioning it, while in Buddhism the leaders are constantly working to

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid Interview Peace Grove Institute.

understand potential problems. Such a perspective is highly subjective, and is probably reductive, possibly revealing Deepa's anger at being considered of a low status because of her religion originally. Still, other discrepancies she pointed out had some real truths. For example, she discussed how in Buddhism, menstruation is recognized as natural, while in Hinduism it is problematized and thought of as wrong and impure. Deepa postulated that it was mostly the Hindu population in Lumbini that was taking part in child marriage. However, according to the NGO statistics, Muslim populations also participate widely in child marriage.<sup>30</sup>

Some of the people from cities and other more globalized areas may not be considering religion to be such an important factor in the lives of the village people. Stated the Rupandehi Police Superintendent, religions yield "superstitions" about practices like child marriage.<sup>31</sup> This reveals both a sort of secularist-exceptionalist bias as well as one of the reasons why the law has proven inefficient at stopping the practice, if those in charge of enforcing the law do not have a firm grip on the potency of religious epistemology.

## **THE LAW**



"How old are you?" –Rupandehi's Police Superintendent  
"Twenty-one." -Me

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid World Development Organization.

<sup>31</sup> Interview, April 15, 2015. Rupandehi District Police Office, 3:00pm

“See? So you are now old enough to choose whether or not you are ready to get married.”

The law on child marriage varies in different countries, just as its enforcement varies. For example, in Afghanistan, a law exists that Shiite and Hazara communities can enact their own “family laws”, which includes permitting family marriage.<sup>32</sup> In most other countries, child marriage is illegal, and has been since the mid twentieth century.

Child marriage has similarly been illegal in Nepal since 1963, though many of the specifics regarding age and enforcement are unclear. Many official sources don’t even have the correct information about the law. For example, while some state that there is a different legal age for girls and boys, and others site the legal age as low as 16, the legal age is, in fact, 18 with parental permission, and 20 without it, for both girls and boys.<sup>33</sup> Considering the professional and official confusion, any local confusion would make sense.

Many written and oral sources report lackluster enforcement. They state that it doesn’t matter that the practice is illegal because no one makes sure that the law is actually followed. Enforcement of the law is made further difficult by the fact that very few marriages are actually legally registered. If officials actually do come to a home to make sure no child marriage has occurred, there are rarely any official documents that could prove to them that a marriage had in fact taken place.

“If someone complains about early marriage, we take action,” stated Raj Wagle, the Superintendent of Police for the Rupandehi district. After a complaint, the police are then supposed to detain the perpetrator. However, Wagle implied that this is not always a simple detainment, and that they will try to take those who violate the child marriage laws away so that they might be sensitized and educated, in order to one day eradicate the practice. Essentially, the entire enforcement of the law relies on receiving complaints. An arrest can only happen after the police have been notified of a violation.

### Personal Anecdote Regarding the Difficulty of Whistle Blowing



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<sup>32</sup> Tristam, Pierre. "Child Marriage: Facts, Causes and Consequences." About.com. Accessed April 22, 2015. <http://middleeast.about.com/od/humanrightsdemocracy/a/child-brides.htm>.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid Interview Police Department.

It had been six days since I had arrived in Lumbini that I saw my first Nepali wedding. After checking with Guruma, one of the head nuns at the school where I was staying, that going to the wedding uninvited would not be culturally appropriate, I grabbed my phone and water bottle and headed across the large hayfield to the tent I saw. As I got closer, I could see some of the guests looking at me. All the women were dressed in beautiful saris, and I had arrived in gray pants, a black tee shirt, and sandals. While sometimes, my half Chinese heritage helps me to pass for Nepali, I learned quickly that this would not be one of those times. The first to approach me were three young girls. We exchanged the customary smiles and “Namastes”, and I used one of the only phrases in Nepali I knew, “Tapaaiko naam ke ho?” Too shy to answer, they giggled and just kept smiling. Together, we walked over to the area behind the car, where an older woman using a bamboo walking stick came over to us. I thought she would be mad at me for coming uninvited, but instead, she came, grabbed my arm, and led me to the area where the groom was sitting, all the while saying, “Come, come! Look, look!” with wide eyes.

She sat me down right near the groom, who was wearing a fancy headdress with many shiny rainbow tassels, and a necklace made out of 10 rupee Ghandiji notes. A woman came into the center of the circle, placed a Tika on the forehead of each man, and then fed him a pinch of powder as well. To the man on the far left, she took a large pinch of powder and weeds and shoved it all in his mouth playfully. The older woman, my fearsome ally looked at me with wide eyes again and said “PHOTO?” motioning to the man who was holding a parasol over the head of the groom. He lifted up the tassels of the groom’s headdress so that I might see his face. Embarrassed, I shook my hands no. I had been confused about who the bride was—I had learned that the bride wears red on her wedding day. But, red is also a color worn by married women generally, so many of the women had red on. At first, I thought it was the woman dancing behind the truck. In an embroidered red crop top and skirt, she had danced expressively to the music, surrounded by men who danced behind her, sometimes even falling to the ground while still moving their hips. I later realized that this “woman” was actually a man, one of the drummers dressed up in a wig, nose ring, earrings, and full female regalia. Then, I thought it was the woman who blessed all of the men with tikas. However, after she acted so playfully with a man who was not the groom, I became skeptical. I sat outside of the colorful tent that was set up on the ground, being force fed sweet Nepali treats by the older women around me. One of the women emerged from the tent, pulling a younger girl with her. The girl’s hair was a little bit messy, and her sari was a darker maroon, so different from the brilliant, embellished saris of the other women there. While everyone else was having a great time, her brow was furrowed, and she said nothing. Even though everyone motioned at her, it wasn’t until they came back from a pump, having washed and dressed the young girl in a beautiful red sari that I realized that she was the bride.

They led her back into the tent and sat her down. She lifted her skirts up to above her ankles, revealing beautiful henna around her feet. The women around her then used a red dye to paint the bottoms of her feet red, and to paint stripes across the tops of her feet. Little kids and older women all crowded around the mouth of the tent, watching this ritual. My guide used her bamboo walking stick to push kids out of the way so I could get a better view, although I urged her not to. “PHOTO?” she told me, doing the same motion where she used her fingers to widen her eyes, meaning “look, look!” I looked at the girls face, and

seeing her worried expression, photographed her feet. When the painting was done and her sindoor was applied, the women shuffled her into a car with the groom,

I asked a boy near me whose English was fairly proficient how old the bride was. He asked his neighbors and responded, “Sixteen”. I realized then that I had the opportunity I had read about—I could go to a police and report the child marriage. By law, the police would have to try to stop the marriage. However, everyone at the wedding had been so nice to me, and besides the bride, they all seemed like they were having such a good time. I would not want to insult their hospitality or their culture. If as an outsider, I felt so nervous of insulting the family, then local people must have an even harder time with the concept of “whistle-blowing”. Finally, while this is obviously a personal story, it is not meant to be objective but rather to show the difficulty of a system of enforcement based upon complaints, especially when the hosting culture is so gracious.

## **EDUCATION**



In order to grasp how unequal the access to education is for girls as compared to boys in Nepal, one might first look at the different literacy rates. While the population of boys aged 6-15 is 72% literate, the population of girls is only 51% literate. At older ages, literacy is lower, and has a greater discrepancy, as many people from older generations never received proper schooling due to lack of schools and lack of value of education. For

the above 15 population 71.6% of young men and 44.0% of young women.<sup>34</sup> According to Deepa, parents sometimes believe that if girls are more educated, they will be more independent and they won't need support from their families, nor will they give support to their families, and thus society will break down.<sup>35</sup>

In general though, girls in Nepal drop out of school for different reasons. While government schools are free, there are usually associated costs for transportation, supplies, or uniforms that many families cannot afford. In other cases, the education offered at the government schools is so subpar that parents consider it negligible. So, while the boys in the family are sent to boarding schools for better educations, the daughters are sometimes pulled out of school altogether. For others, the problem is rather that the women at home need help cooking, cleaning, and tending to the crops, so while their husbands are away at work, they recruit their daughters. Elders will tease a girl and her family before marriage, but after marriage, the girl will often get teased by her friends, which can cause a hesitation on her part to come to school. For still others, the matter is more one of public health; many schools lack sufficiently private facilities for girls who are menstruating. Furthermore, many girls face abuse, violence, or harassment from boys when they travel to and from school. Finally, since once girls are married they move to the homes of their husband's families, some of the girl's parents see little point in pursuing educations for their daughters.<sup>36</sup>

If a girl drops out and there is not enough need for her help at home, parents will often marry her off quickly in order to prevent her from having idle time and possibly engaging in a premarital affair that would ruin her reputation and make it harder for her to find a husband. It can also be the women who dropped out and are not married yet who are most vulnerable to be trafficked or abused.

Many parents believe that girls who attend coeducational schools are also at risk of premarital affairs and ruined reputations, so they don't encourage their daughters to seek educations. Schools like the Karuna Girls College that offer education specifically for girls are thus especially important, since not only do they encourage parents to seek valuable educations for their daughters, but they also assuage their nerves about coeducational schools. Guruma Soma stated that "Girls are supposed to maintain their virginities, purity, and reputation before marriage. Sending girls to school can be perceived as risky because of the interaction with boys." One can see the practice of social "taboo" at work here, as for many families it becomes a reproducing trend of not encouraging girls' education past the level of fifth or sixth grade. Girls and their parents are so nervous about making the "mistake" of having a relationship before marriage that the parents will maintain very strict rules.

Before the leaders at the Peace Grove Institute opened the Metta School, all of the forms of local education available to girls were governmental schools, which have no English instruction, only Nepali instruction, and infamously bad teachers and educations. Some richer people would send their kids as far as Bhairahawa for boarding schools. Guruma Anjuli herself grew up attending the local government schools. Each day she would walk eight kilometers to get to school, from eight o'clock in the morning till ten

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<sup>34</sup> "NEPAL: The Hidden Costs of Early Marriage." IRINnews. Accessed May 1, 2015. <http://www.irinnews.org/report/95654/nepal-the-hidden-costs-of-early-marriage>.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid Interview Gautam Nun Monastery April 15

<sup>36</sup> Ibid Interview Peace Grove Institute April 14



o'clock. She would then stay at school till four in the afternoon, and would then walk eight kilometers back and get home at five thirty. Her parents couldn't read, and her brother only continued his schooling through eighth grade before he stopped.

Karuna is only two years old and is the only all girls school in the villages of Lumbini. The Venerable Metteyya Sakyaputta, a community leader who was aware of the problems in education, started Karuna in order to provide a free alternative to the government schools known for corruption and poor education. For younger children, he created the Metta schools, and for girl specific education issues he started Karuna. Furthermore, through creating this family of schools, Guruji Metteyya formed a group of community leaders who were empowered and knowledgeable in discussing community initiatives and problems. Because Karuna is free of charge, it also is a school of mixed castes, and girls of mixed academic backgrounds and abilities.<sup>37</sup>

While Karuna is associated with Buddhist organizations, it is not necessary for students to be Buddhist or convert to Buddhism. Metteyya designed the school under the premise that education would be more important than religion. He imagined the girls returning to their villages after having attended the school with good educations and good characters, not necessarily religion. Religion could rather be studied and gained in a form of social capital, as it is in nondenominational schools with religion curriculums.

Luckily, local people were appreciative of the establishing of the Karuna school. At first, people came to the school with the intention of closing it, fearing that because it was free, other schools would go out of business, but once they saw the school and heard the reasons why it had been started, they admitted its necessity and the opposition stopped.

In conjunction with access to education, it is important to consider the ability to "self-determine" one's future. In general, this is the idea that an individual has the right to decide his or her own future, and will not be forced to abide by certain rules or rituals against his or her will. One of the girls in the focus group at the Karuna Girls College stated that there is freedom before marriage, but that after marriage she must care for the house, and cannot study as much. In-laws often don't think that the education of their son's wife is that important, and instead value her ability to bare and take care of children. The question "what do you want to do when you grow up?" becomes a privilege rather than a right. Girls are not encouraged to think about their education, and are instead supposed to focus solely upon marriage. Parents and societies motivate boys to do whatever it is that they think they want to do. It is not the same for girls, however. Says Guruma Anjuli, "They can't think about girls like that." At these all girls institutions, girls are not only ensured of an education, but also of a future. At the Gautam Nun's Monastery, the enrolled girls are similarly able to complete their schooling, and are even beginning to work as teachers.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid Interview Peace Grove Institute April 14

## HEALTH EDUCATION AND PERIOD SHAME



When girls get pulled out of school earlier, they are often even less familiar with reproductive health issues. According to Soma, one of the Guruma nuns at the Peace Grove Institute in Lumbini, all women have limited access to healthcare, and the nearest hospital is up to thirty minutes away by crowded bus in the capital city, Bhairahawa. She didn't know of anyone in the area who was specifically trained to deal with women's health issues. Some of the villages had small, government health clinics, but their utility was unclear. Some schools provide health education, mostly through the science curriculum. Peace Grove and the affiliated and neighboring Karuna Girls College host a health camp, where doctors and nurses come in from Kathmandu and Canada to teach the girls about healthcare. It's having an effect on the girls too: many of the girls at the nunnery and at the college are studying to be midwives, nurses, and doctors.<sup>38</sup>

Besides classes and trainings regarding health, many schools don't even have adequate toilet resources, a large problem when girls are menstruating and lack sufficient privacy. Women's Rights Organizers are also working to get sanitary pads in schools for girls, so that they don't have to rely on their parents. In some rural communities, menstruation is not well understood, and people think it is a sign of poor nutrition and makes the girl "impure".<sup>39</sup>

Many of the new nunneries are making sure to provide better health education for their constituents. According to Deepa, the nineteen year old nun at the Gautam Nun Monastery, they learned about health, in addition to subjects like English and Buddhism, and that their health curriculum covered physical hygiene like how to clean, and puberty, in particular the physical changes that the body undergoes. "It's necessary," she stated of

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid Interview Peace Grove Institute April 14

<sup>39</sup> Ibid Interview WDO

learning about one's body. When it came to doctors though, she was not as convinced, and stated that the girls usually solve health problems themselves.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, the girls in the focus group at the Karuna Girls College agreed and also stated that they usually go to their mothers for health advice, and that typically, girls learn about puberty from their mothers, especially if they aren't lucky enough to attend one of these schools. One of the girl's mother was dead, so she said that she would go to her older sister. They agreed that if no one else were available, they would go to their teachers.

Much of the reason that health education is so important is that there are many health risks associated with premature pregnancy, and by association, premature marriage. Due to the fact that many of the husbands' families pressure girls to have babies immediately, early marriage also often leads to early childbirth and mothering. While puberty is generally considered to occur for girls between the ages of ten and fourteen, this does not mean that the body has necessarily stopped maturing. In fact, the girl's body continues to grow and develop for years afterwards. If she gives birth before the body has finished developing, there can be very serious complications. In fact, maternal death is the leading cause of death for girls ages 15 to 19 across the globe.<sup>41</sup> Girls under the age of 15 are five times more likely to suffer from maternal death than women in their 20s are. An example of this actually comes from one of the nuns at the Gautam Nun's Monastery in Lumbini, Draupadi from Eastern Nepal's mother died in childbirth.<sup>42</sup>

Another complication of early pregnancy is called a uterine prolapse, a condition in which the female's muscles and ligaments can no longer hold the uterus in its place, so that, in effect, the uterus slides too far down the cervix.<sup>43</sup> The causes of this condition vary, and include bearing children with too few years in between, not resting properly after giving birth, continuing to work, especially manual labor, during pregnancy, as well as early pregnancy. It can cause pelvic pain, too-frequent urination, painful sexual intercourse, vaginal bleeding, reproductive and urinary tract infections, constipation, vaginal discharge, difficulty walking, and urinary incontinence. Such symptoms can impinge upon a girl's ability to fulfill her daily obligations, from manual labor to sitting or holding her child. While uterine prolapse is mostly found in post-menopausal women globally, in Nepal, young women also suffer from prolapse. Statistics support this finding; according to one study it might be up to 14 per cent of the instances in Nepal occur in women under the age of 20. Another study found that up to 61 per cent of women who had suffered uterine prolapse bore their first child before they turned nineteen. In a large, statistical study performed by Unicef, 10% of women in Nepal knowingly stated that they had been diagnosed with uterine prolapse. 12.1% of men said their wives had suffered from this condition.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid Interview Gautam Nun Monastery

<sup>41</sup> Ibid Ingber

<sup>42</sup> Ibid Interview Gautam Nun Monastery

<sup>43</sup> Ibid Percynska

<sup>44</sup> Ibid WDO, An illustration of this condition: [http://www.beliefnet.com/healthandhealing/images/uterine\\_prolapse.jpg](http://www.beliefnet.com/healthandhealing/images/uterine_prolapse.jpg)

## SYMBOLS OF MARRIAGE, LIFE OF MARRIED WOMAN



It is no secret that clothing and bodily adornment are more than mere ways to cover one's body and keep warm—they denote religion, social status, culture, as well as personal style and identification. While Lumbini is the Buddha's birthplace, it is also home to a large and thriving Hindu population, and a number of Muslim settlements as well. That being said, to walk around Lumbini is to see women in different saris, full Hijabs and veils, modern dress, kurtas, and Buddhist robes. Learning how to read these external signs and symbols is part of understanding the culture. For one, an onlooker might notice the prominence of the color red in women's saris—red is actually considered an auspicious color in Nepali culture and features prominently in weddings, sacred ceremonies, and important Hindu festivals. Unlike its connotation in Western culture, (think *Scarlet Letter*), in South Asian culture the color actually signifies purity, dignity and honor, more like the color white in Judeo-Christian religions. For example, on her wedding, a bride wears a red sari, embellished with gold embroidery and intricate beadwork. States *The Red Sari*, this symbolizes her "cherished status" and shows that the girl has transitioned from adolescent to woman.<sup>45</sup>

For a bride's wedding, she is also supposed to take part in a Mehndi ceremony, in which her arms, hands, and feet are decorated with henna ink in floral and other delicate patterns. The groom also is meant to first apply a sindoor, a mark in red or orange vermillion powder, to his bride's upper forehead. The woman is meant to wear this mark every day thereafter. Besides the sindoor, married women also daily wear red bangles, known as "churis" made of metal or plastic and a red necklace, sometimes with a swirly gold pendant known as a "mugal sutra" to signify her married status. On her wedding,

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<sup>45</sup> "Our Name." *The Red Sari*. Accessed April 18, 2015. <http://theredsari.com/about-us/the-red-sari-name/>.

family members will paint the bottoms of her feet red, sometimes with some stripes across the top of the foot as well, and she will be expected to daily maintain this herself as well.<sup>46</sup>

Some of the village women in the Terai, including Subhauti, a forty-five year old woman living in Mahilwar, have tattoos on their forearms. The tattoos are meant to symbolize Sita, the ideal Hindu “pativrata” or wife, who is colloquially known for her devotion in the kitchen, but in actual tradition was a gatherer.<sup>47</sup>

While the number and visibility of these aesthetic traditions may seem excessive, it is hardly as unique as one might at first fancy. The engagement ring and wedding band in western cultures are often similarly supposed to be symbols of “being taken”. While men also often wear wedding bands, the engagement ring is typically flashier and bestowed upon the woman by the man, who initiates the proposal traditionally, and uses his money in order to buy this gift for the woman.

If a woman is widowed, she goes through a similar reversal of these rites. She is sometimes expected to break her red bangles, and will no longer don the sindoor, mugal sutra, or the color red generally. Rather, the widow typically dresses in white and black, or generally drab colors. Often, this symbolizes a sort of “social death” of the widow. Remarrying is not a possibility, and the woman may even further be barred from speaking to men outside of her family or going to public ceremonies.

## **THE DOWRY**



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<sup>46</sup> Ibid The Red Sari

<sup>47</sup> Herman, Phyllis. "Manushi: Sita in the Kitchen - Issue 120." India Together. Accessed May 9, 2015. <http://indiatogether.org/manushi/issue120/sita.htm>.

One of the core reasons why the practice of child marriage has continued despite its illegality is the simultaneous perpetuation of the dowry system. Dowry is defined as the property, goods and/or money that a bride's family gives to a groom's family. Household goods given in dowry can include everything from a fan or cooker to a car, all dependent on caste.<sup>48</sup> The purpose has historically been either a sort of assurance of protection and safety for the wife from domestic violence or poor treatment from a husband and his family, or to help and pay for some of the expenses that will be incurred after marriage. In some communities, a dowry can be more of a gift to a young couple from the parents so that they might start a life together.<sup>49</sup> In Nepal, the monetary value of the dowry can range from around the equivalents of 200 to 20,000 US dollars, and can include gifts as well, such as household goods, or gold and silver. In the Lumbini villages, 1000USD is considered to be fairly cheap, even though it can be over twice as much as many people's yearly income. Because the married couple most often lives with the husband's family, the dowry does not go to the bride and groom to start their lives, but rather to the groom's family. Furthermore, because many of the people in Nepal who engage in practices of dowry collection and child marriage are of lower castes, the dowries can often be exorbitantly expensive for them. More than half of Nepal's population lives on less than 1.25USD per day, so that a dowry of 1000 dollars can wind up accounting for years of saved wages, before one's own daily expenditures.<sup>50</sup> According to Rima, the dowry price depends on both the bride and the groom, for example, if the bride is younger, the price is lower; however, if the groom is of a high class profession, for example a doctor or an engineer, then the dowry may be as high as 30 or 40 lakhs, a lakh being 20,000. In other words, that is 6,000 US dollars to 8,000.

Once one recognizes how expensive dowries can be for Nepalese families, it is understandable that saving money on a dowry becomes a priority. Considering the fact that dowries are cheaper for younger girls, one can understand one reason why child marriage has continued. Additionally, if a family has a girl and a boy, even if they don't want to have to collect a dowry from their son's wife's family, they often will because it helps them pay for their daughter's wedding. It is difficult at this point to find people who will marry without a dowry.

The dowry system is not popular in most other parts of Nepal, and many point to it as one of the customs that has come over from India. The Superintendent of Rupandehi Police stated that dowry is still a problem in the more "tribal" communities, therein further revealing a disconnect between the city and the villages. Despite its illegality, it is still widely in practice, as it is harder to stop "bad culture" than bad laws.<sup>51</sup>

For Javana, a 70 year-old housewife in Mahilwar, her parents were very poor, and so her dowry included pots, rice, and money. She was married when she was seven years old, though she didn't move into her husband's house until three years later. Her parents decided when she would marry, who she would marry, and when she would leave the home. Of her children, only the boys studied, the girls had to help her in the home as well.

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid Interview House of Subhanti Jha

<sup>49</sup> "Dowry | Marriage Custom." Encyclopedia Britannica Online. November 24, 2014. Accessed May 5, 2015. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/170540/dowry>.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid Ingber

<sup>51</sup> Ibid Interview Police Department.

Her daughters married at the age of seven as well, but her grandchildren would have a different fate: one of her granddaughters was a novice nun at the Peace Grove Institute.<sup>52</sup>

Another problem with the dowry system is how it adds to the high priority placed upon giving birth to sons, as compared to daughters. Because the daughter moves into the husband's home after marriage and it costs the family so much to marry her, parents wind up losing not only their money but also the extra help around the house. States a Global Post article, parents sometimes consider daughters to be a "lost investment" or "simply extra mouths to feed". As a result, most of the family's money goes towards raising their sons rather than their daughters.<sup>53</sup> The girls at the Karuna Girls College were also aware of the way that the dowry system prioritizes boys. It is very rare to have a family without boys. One 13-year old girl said she had 7 sisters and 1 younger brother, and that the brother is the youngest.<sup>54</sup>

Rima believes that it is a problem to bargain a girl's life in this way, and to quantify her life in this monetary fashion. She also points out, from personal experience, that it is possible to have an arranged wedding without a dowry. While she earned her education in Kathmandu, Rima was raised in the Madhesi, and considers her culture to be that of the Terai. Her marriage was arranged, but she made sure there was no dowry involved. Of arranged marriages, she states that the main difference is just when the wife gets to know the husband, and when they know that they share love.<sup>55</sup>

The other problem with the dowry is the leverage it gives the in-laws over their daughter in-law. If the dowry is too much for the wife's family to pay, the husband's family might mentally torture the girl and her family. For example, the husband's family may repeat that the wife's family gave nothing, and in turn won't support the girl financially when she needs it. Sometimes girls get beaten or killed as a result of dowry conflicts.

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<sup>52</sup> Interview, April 21, Mahilwar, Outside by the water pump, 1:00pm

<sup>53</sup> Ingber, Hanna. "Child Marriages Burden Young Nepalis." GlobalPost. October 30, 2011. Accessed April 21, 2015. <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/health/111030/child-marriages-burden-young-nepalis>.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid Focus Group

<sup>55</sup> Ibid Interview WDO

## DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND SUICIDE



One of the arguments that proponents of child marriage use is that by marrying girls off early, they are protected from violence and sexual abuse. However, in actuality, child marriage often makes girls more susceptible to such abuse, as often times the husband or husband's family wind up being the girl's abusers. This idea is part of the common misconception that rape happens by strangers, when in actuality the majority of rape happens with people whom the victim knows. It is no different in the case of Nepal's child brides, as girls who marry before the age of eighteen are actually more likely to experience domestic and sexual violence in their marital households. According to the organization Her Turn, women married before the age of eighteen were "twice as likely to have been beaten and threatened" as women who were married after eighteen. These child brides were also three times as likely to report having been "coerced into sexual activities".<sup>56</sup>

Domestic violence is still a problem in both urban and rural areas. Rima stated that in the cities, men will drink and then go home and fight with their families, sometimes even beating their wife and kids. Domestic violence is "too common", she finished.

As previously stated, violence sometimes occurs in these communities as a result of disagreements regarding a girl's dowry. If the groom's parents aren't satisfied with the dowry, certain families have been known to beat or torture the wife, sometimes even killing her or encouraging sexual abuse. The husband's family uses the bride and securing her wellbeing in order to try and get more money or gifts from her parents. While dowry killings are more rare in Nepal than they are in India, and no one knew of any in Rupandehi, dowry torture still certainly exists. The reports of girls being tortured in the Terai, where punishments could include being bathed with acid or kerosene, is higher than the national average.

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid Percynzka



Javana, the 70 year old housewife from Mahilwar faced some difficulties with her husband's parents. She was only about 10 when she moved into their home, and when she first moved in her new family was not very good to her. They gave her lots of housework, but little respect. Her husband cared for her fairly well, and gave her sufficient money, but his parents would force her to do all the work without any rest. She had her first child in her own home at the age of seventeen. A local nurse helped, but it was still very painful. Birth was easier for her successive children. It was only after she gave birth that her in-laws started to accept her and help her more.

Sometimes, pregnancy complications can cause pain and loss of sexual appetite which in turn sometimes leads to rape. For example, with uterine prolapse often comes pain and discomfort, and thus, women who suffer from it frequently don't want to have sex with their husbands. This can further lead to rape, domestic violence, or infidelity and abandonment.

Suntali, a Nepalese woman profiled by the Society for Local Integrated Development or SOLID Nepal, stated that after six weeks of marriage, her husband had sex with her before she was ready. "I didn't know what I was doing; I tried to push him away," she stated. He continued to force her to have sex two to three times per week after that, causing pain each time. Although Suntali did not want to get pregnant, she wasn't educated as to the possible consequences of sex, and soon her child, Durga, was born.<sup>57</sup>

The Women's Development Office stated that in the district in the last month, two or three cases of rape had been reported, including one of father and daughter, though they didn't specify how many were related to child marriage.<sup>58</sup> While rape is still largely not fully discussed or understood, people are starting to talk about it more.

Also according to the Rupandehi Women's Development Organization, suicide often results when teenagers have been raped and are in the midst of the rape case, having to relive the drama, or when wives get so frustrated by domestic violence that they commit suicide. Sometimes, if two individuals attempt a love marriage and the love starts to fade or fail, individuals might also commit suicide. There are also cases of parents forbidding a marriage because of different castes, citizenships, experience levels, financial levels, or religious levels, which causes either the girl or the boy to commit suicide.

Another dangerous consequence of the importance placed upon marriage for women in Nepal is that some brokers will use the promise of marriage to entice village women to become sex workers. Brokers may seem like they lead richer city lives, which attracts women to them. Many of the brothels in the bordering Indian states are filled with these particular Nepalese women. Some social activists working in the eastern Terai discovered a gang of attractive men who will sell young, local girls to brothels at the border with India after marrying them.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid Ingber

<sup>58</sup> Ibid Interview WDO

<sup>59</sup> "RAOnline Nepal: Women in Nepal - Social Life - Early Marriages - Child Marriages - Caste, Prostitution, Human Rights." RAOnline Nepal: Women in Nepal - Social Life - Early Marriages - Child Marriages - Caste, Prostitution, Human Rights. Accessed April 8, 2015. <http://www.raonline.ch/pages/np/npwom05.html>.

## HOW TO FIX IT



Already, one can see some changes in the practice of child marriage. Besides a gradual rising of the average age of marriage, now, after marriage, many girls will stay in school now rather than drop out immediately as well. In general, there is a greater importance placed upon education. Twenty years ago, there was only one school within twenty-five square kilometers. One can now see the building of that school in a more hidden part of the Lumbini Development Trust Zone, overtaken by weeds, a testament to how few students used to have access to education. Parents are now making sure to give their children the opportunities for education that they never had. Now that the current generation is being educated, many hope that they will be able to prevent their own children from marrying early.

As it stands, the Karuna Girls College and affiliated schools of the Peace Grove Institute are the only visible organizations in the Lumbini village area that are working to prevent child marriage. By providing girls with a free education and a place to stay where their parents can rest assured that they are safe from harassing men, the Metta Family is giving these girls a better chance to gain a worthy education and determine their own futures. An example of the benefits reaped from these schools would be the English language instruction. In many of the local villages, due to the inequality in education, adolescent boys speak English fairly well while the girls cannot. This means that jobs in the tourism industry and other professions that require these foreign language skills will remain reserved for men.

Anjuli, one of the Gurumas, joined Peace Grove at the age of 16 because she wanted to continue to learn, especially about her own society. She like studying “too much”, but no one really studied in her community, so she found the nunnery where she could live and do her schoolwork. She wanted to be an example for other girls in her village, and hopes to one day even attain her PhD. She enjoys doing social work, and adores studying Buddhism.

Another local Buddhist nun organization, the Gautam Nun Monastery, similarly admits local girls who are looking for a different life than that offered to them in the villages. States Deepa, there is “freedom” in life at the monastery. She feels the life of a nun is better than that of a local village girl; at the nunnery she gets to study, to spend time with likeminded young women and to share in her future, whereas in her village she would have had “no chance”, and would have been sent to her husband’s home regardless. While it was surely difficult for her family, Mira’s mother supported her becoming a nun. “I’m proud of my mother,” Mira stated. Despite this family pride, she didn’t actually remember much about her life before the nunnery. “This is the place where I started to understand about life,” she said, gesturing at the monastery.

The Metta School family has also helped to form a small group of community leaders working to create real change. Guruma Soma and other members of this group have even gone into the villages to speak directly with parents and warn them of the dangers of child marriage, the need to enforce the law, and the illegality of dowries. In the future, Guruma Soma invokes the Buddhist philosophy of interconnectivity to explain how to combat the practice of child marriage: parents must be educated, policy change must accompany better economic status within the villages, there needs to be more sex and health education, and there need to be more job opportunities for women. Considering the fact that there aren’t even enough job opportunities for men right now, more markets must be created so that women can strive for some professional success after school.

When asked how she thinks the practice of child marriage can stop, she pointed out the problem with trying to educate parents. There are too many parents, she argued. Instead, she and the other leaders at Peace Grove figured that they could give education to kids, as kids are the future. The children can then talk to their parents and try to convince their parents themselves. Sometimes, the nuns and monks will collect the parents for a discussion, but more often they focus on the next generations.

Any governmental offices and organizations that are working towards ending the practice of child marriage are in the capitol city of Bhairahawa, not the village areas where child marriage actually exists. A government funded “Women’s Development Organization” exists here, on the northern end of town, near some other governmental offices. Anyone can enter the building to find three women working, answering phones, and reading the local news. These women work to organize child marriage trainings, monitor child orphanage homes, coordinate educational support for poor and needy children, and oversee training for children who are affected by conflicts. They make sure to uphold the country’s policy and publicize the legal rules and regulations, and some of the women in this office even take part in the global fight against child marriage. The Child Marriage Officer, Rima Gupta has even been able to attend international conventions on child brides, flying as far as America to discuss with global leaders how to protect child brides and how to protect young women, generally.

Rima didn't originally plan to work in the Women's Development Office, or rather, the "Mahila Bikas". After achieving her Masters in management she found herself looking for a job, and there was an opening in this particular government office. Now, within her capacity at the office, she operates skill development workshops, income generation programs, and holds other trainings at the WDO, and hosts girls health, nutrition, pregnancy, and menstruation trainings at the District Public Health Office. She and her coworkers also are in charge of telling school principals to keep sanitary pads in the schools for girls.

Rima pointed out that child marriage does not merely fall under the "Women's Development" heading, but also under the jurisdiction of the child rights offices. She splits her time between the WDO and the District Child Welfare Board. In the case of children's rights, the prevention of child marriage is not the only commonly disobeyed law. According to code, children under the age of fourteen are not allowed to be used for labor, but people often do not follow this rule either. In the Rupandehi district, the main legal issues include child marriage, child labor, and street children. Since there is no orphanage and no rehabilitation center, it is very hard to manage many of the local kids who are involved with marriage, live on the streets, or are forced into child labor. Child laborers often get addicted to drugs, but there is nowhere for them to go after that.

Another difficulty in managing some of the issues with women and children's rights encountered in Rupandehi is that there seems to be a sort of disconnect between the center of operations in the capitol city and the location of many of the problems in the surrounding villages. Bhairahawa is located right on the border with Uttar Pradesh in India, and as a result is a major trading city. It houses the Gautam Buddha Airport, which is being expanded into an international airport, Nepal's second after the Tribhuvan airport in Kathmandu. In general, Bhairahawa is quite busy, and is the location for some very large and colorful homes. NGOs operate in Bhairahawa and there is a large, important hospital as well as many national governmental offices. Many officials describe child marriage in the cities as "not really a problem", and the child marriage that does exist in the cities is often love marriage rather than arranged by the parents. Rima stated that it is very hard to incur change in the smaller villages, because the people there are often uneducated. She said that it is difficult to convince parents to put their children in child homes, which would provide them with safe shelter and education, including access to higher education. There are not that many child homes in the area though, and in general, Rima stated that the Mahila Bikas Office had "a low budget and low programs". Invoking the English version of the popular Nepali phrase, "Ke garne", she finished by stating "What to do?"

In general, Rima had observed that urban children would actively participate in the program put together by the Women's Development Office and the District Children's Welfare Office. They were generally active and they found these programs to be meaningful. To encourage members from the rural villages to come, the government would offer them money. However, as a result, she had found that many of them came to the meetings solely for that reason, and didn't participate in the trainings or programs as meaningfully. Similarly, the Rupandehi Superintendent of Police postulated that in rural areas children drop out to marry early more, even though their educations are free. He stated that there is no law abiding there, and that there are minimal programs to keep kids in school. Even books and uniforms are free, he stated. However, according to the people who actually live in the rural villages, there are some associated costs with schooling, and

often the government schools are so bad in the areas, and are so little respected, that some parents don't even bother sending their kids to school there.

The Police Department is also organizing programs working to stop child marriage. They have coordinated with NGOs to put on public audiences and bring leaders from the community together. However, these are often centered on the city area as well, while the practice is almost entirely located in the rural villages of Rupandehi. The Police Superintendent reiterated this by pointing out that girls in the city are usually educated, and thus don't agree to marriage.

In general, while the district organizations in Bhairahawa were certainly informed and doing important work, some of the differences in narrative between the workers in the city and the people in the villages revealed some of the miscommunications and culture differences between these two regions. This thus further demonstrated the necessity of offices and organizations that have a lasting presence in the villages. Organizations like the World Health Organization and CARE Nepal have sometimes operated programs in the more remote, rural areas, but there aren't many permanent offices, and at the time of this research, none of these organizations had any visible presence. Women who need interventions in their personal lives are encouraged to come into local police offices or women's shelters, but these too are often closed or not in operation in villages. Many of the police officers in the Lumbini area were based around the Development Trust region and bent on monitoring tourists rather than some of the villages and local people.

Already, the Karuna Girls School is providing access to great education for girls in the area. By expanding and improving the school even more, as well as perhaps creating scholarships to national universities that would be made available to the girls there, then girls could start to really have a better chance at their own futures. By educating them, they could also start to refuse to get married with dowries and at ages that are too young. It might also change the dynamic in the household, so that husbands and wives would both be working and then both be helping out in the house.

Additionally, simply having a local Women's Development Office in the village area would be one quick way to continue to create sustainable change. Providing women with a safe place to go if they feared domestic violence, rape, or were running away from child marriage would be incredibly important. Local women could be trained by international or city volunteers on how to uphold international standards of health education and then could educate local girls about puberty, pregnancy, sex, and marriage. These professionals could then check back in with the program, to make sure that it was still running well. This local office could further provide birth control, contraception, period supplies, maybe even abortions one day. These women could deal with these cases, and hold focus groups and training for women. Ideally this would be funded through donations rather than the government, so that such a center wouldn't be susceptible to government budget cuts. The idea behind such a center is that it would not only provide a safe, supportive, and educational space for women, but it would also provide jobs and security for those trained to handle these problems. In general, it would be aimed to erase any stigmas about women's health and safety, and change the pervading patriarchal dialogue.

An additional idea that many publications and organizations do not mention is a widespread agricultural streamlining. As previously mentioned, the Terai houses the majority of Nepal's farmable land, yet as it stands, is not being used efficiently. If members

of the Terai could turn farming more into an occupation rather than a household chore, then they could begin to supply the rest of the country with good produce and generate more income. By generating more income, people could hopefully become less dependent on the dowry system, and wouldn't need to marry their children off so early. This also means that there would be less work in the fields that the women would need to do, so that they could have more time for education and jobs.<sup>60</sup>

In general, all stressed that one cannot expect child marriage to stop immediately. Because it is so traditional and entrenched in their culture, it will take a while to stop the practice. More people are starting to have sympathy, and more people are starting to allow the topic to come out of the dark and into their conversations. In general, many aspects of the culture that once supported the practice of child marriage are changing. The government and NGOs are working to implement the laws that exist regarding child marriage, and to sensitize and educate the people. However, when one actually goes to the Terai, to districts like Rupandehi, one can actually see that the situation is not hopeless, but rather isn't yet being sufficiently tended to. There is so little visible presence of aid and organizations in the villages where child marriage is actually a problem that some small changes could really start to make a difference.

## **CONCLUSION**



To return to the idea of child marriage as an “assemblage”, one must now look at the dowry, socioeconomic factors, access to education, access to healthcare, increased

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<sup>60</sup> Additionally, this area is farther away from the mountains and thus the fault line. If Nepal developed the Terai more (by the people of the Terai, with the benefits helping the people of the Terai), in case of other earthquakes, they might have a more reliable, domestic base of resources.

vulnerability to domestic abuse, the way that marriage is inscribed upon the body of the female, the difference in daily roles, and the general culture of the Terai as important factors and influencers with different relationships to the practice of child marriage. It is not an issue that can be elucidated with statistics, rather, because of its deeply personal effects, it must be localized within its culture and those who have experienced child marriage must be humanized and have their stories heard. In other words, the people who participate in child marriage or are at risk of child marriage are also at risk of being dehumanized in the surrounding dialogue. The people within Nepal from more privileged backgrounds sometimes blame the prevalence of child marriage on the lack of education or refinement of the people in the villages. They employ a sort of border town psyche in order to brand the people of the Terai as Indian, rather than Nepali, thereby not taking responsibility for the customs that create the practice and not using empathy in their treatment of these people. International organizations often use homogenizing statistics that often mask the real causal dynamics, and frame child marriage as an issue of “undeveloped” countries.

In actuality, though, marriage may need to be redefined across the globe. The American Wedding Industry is said to be a 51 billion dollar industry. In 2013, the average stateside wedding cost \$29,858 not including the honeymoon. In certain places, like Manhattan, the average price of a wedding is far greater, nearing \$90,000. A bride’s dress alone averages over \$1,000. Between engagement parties, newspaper announcements, the ceremony, reception, and honeymoon, the whole process is highly ritualized and highly priced.<sup>61</sup> In fact, weddings have become such a lucrative industry that they have become the subject of a number of reality TV shows, including such classy titles as “Bridezillas”, “Bulging Brides”, “Say Yes to the Dress”, “Bridalplasty” and “Engaged and Underage”. As evidenced by the titles of these shows, weddings are a highly gendered tradition in the United States. Furthermore, as demonstrated by the prices of weddings, it is not only through the South Asian dowry system that families of the bride and groom are expected to pay large sums of money accompanying the union. After marriage, there is certainly still a discrepancy between the roles of married men and women. To this day, in the United States, women make seventy-eight cents to a man’s dollar, women are only 47 per cent of the labor force in the States, and only 14.6 per cent of executive officers. From all of this information, one can understand that in many cultures and instances, because of the traditional binary of “husband and wife” (or even “man and wife”) marriage is a gendered affair. It is not only in Nepal, South Asia, or the eastern hemisphere in which marriage is a symptom of a grander dynamic of discrepancy in gender roles. As the world globalizes and modernizes, so too must our definition of marriage.

Furthermore, it is not only in countries like Nepal where girls from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are more at risk of becoming teenage mothers: many teenagers become pregnant in America, and most of these teenagers are from either more rural areas or lower income communities. This information points out that marriage and childbirth are assemblages everywhere, and that in general, women of lower socioeconomic statuses are more at risk of becoming mothers early and having fewer future prospects. This brings back Kimberle Crenshaw’s term of “intersectionality”: we

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<sup>61</sup> Grose, Jessica. "The \$51 Billion Wedding Industry Toasts a Post-DOMA Bump." Bloomberg.com. June 23, 2013. Accessed May 9, 2015. <http://www.bloomberg.com/bw/articles/2013-06-28/the-51-billion-wedding-industry-toasts-a-post-doma-bump>.

must be aware of how different axes of difference can combine and make life especially uneven and difficult for those at the intersections.

In “Bodies-Cities” by Elizabeth Grosz, she redefines the term “body”, first in terms of the human body, and through the further lens of women studies. She states,

“The body becomes a human body, a body that coincides with the ‘shape’ and space of a psyche, a body that defines the limits of experience and subjectivity only through the intervention of the (m)other and, ultimately, the Other (the language- and rule-governed social order). Among the key structuring principles of this produced body is its inscription and coding by {familiarily ordered} sexual desires {i.e., the desire of/for the other}, which produce (and ultimately repress) the infant’s bodily zones, orifices, and organs as libidinal sources; its inscription by a set of socially coded meanings and significances (both for the subject and for others), making the body a meaningful, ‘readable’, depth entity; its production and development through various regimes of discipline and training, including the coordination and integration of its bodily functions so that not only can it undertake general social tasks, but also become part of a social network, linked to other bodies and objects.”<sup>62</sup>

In this seminal paragraph in feminist theory, Grosz is essentially defining subjectivity as a result of socialization and the external social order. This “body” is further produced and defined by sex and sexual desires, and by “inscription” of social meanings, which make the body “readable”. Finally, the body is trained to be part of the larger space it inhabits, and in so doing, maintain relationships with other bodies and objects.

When combining this theory to that of Crenshaw’s “intersectionality” and applying them to the practice of child marriage and the women in Nepal’s Terai, a few patterns become clear. For one, each defining demographic in a way becomes an inscription upon the body, and determines the subjectivity. Girls in the Rupandehi are socialized and raised to understand certain limitations and cultural rules as societal truths.

In the case of the women in the Terai, it is particularly interested because not only is the body made socially readable, but in doing so, the body is also made physically readable. Considering the fact that Lumbini, while a Buddhist holy site, is primarily Muslim and Hindu, one can imagine the variety of traditional religious clothing that women wear; in Lumbini, one can see women in full veils, partial veils, saris, kurtas, modern westernized clothing, and nuns’ garments. At the Peace Grove Institute, one can see the holes in the noses of the novice nuns from where their nose piercings used to be; their conversion thus leaves physical markings or scars, in addition to the internal changes. Additionally, a married woman is made readable by her mugal sutra, her bangles, tattoos, red painted feet, or red sari.

Besides the ways that the body is inscribed by physical adornment, there are also the ways that the body is inscribed by titles and traumas. Divorce, for example, becomes an inscription, and as so few couples actually divorce, those that do are usually talked about. While divorce in these regions is rare, being a widow is certainly less rare. A widow is forced to remove and break her red bangles, symbolizing her loss of status of “being cherished”. This ritual is far less terrible than the ritual of “sati”, or widow-burning. In this ritual, a widow would be made to lie on top of her husband’s funeral pyre and bury alive. In this way, her physical death made concrete the social death that occurred when her husband passed. The practice is named after Sati, the goddess who burned herself to honor her husband Shiva, and is mentioned in certain principle Hindu epics such as the Naradsmriti. The popularity of this practice varied in Nepal, until finally in 1920 it was declared illegal by Chandra Shumsher. Even though Sati has been abolished in Nepal, the

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<sup>62</sup> Grosz, Elizabeth. "Bodies-Cities." Scribd. Accessed April 17, 2015. <https://www.scribd.com/doc/30459390/Elizabeth-Grosz-Bodies-Cities>.



social death enforced upon a widow has not been. No one gives widows money or cares for the widow. The auspicious color of red is barred from her wardrobe, and she is pitied by those in her village.

Grosz's Bodies-Cities defines a "body", but it does not define the specifics of inscription or socialization. What this means is that while humans will inevitably be inscribed with symbolic meanings, demographics and cultural practices, while humans will always be part of larger societies where they will maintain relationships with others who will be able to "read" their inscriptions, the particulars of the inscriptions need not necessarily be oppressive or discriminatory. In order to truly create sustainable change and stop the practice of child marriage in Nepal's Terai, simply ensuring that the practice is illegal and encouraging neighbors to tattle on those getting married around them is not enough. One must consider the interconnectivity of the practice as an assemblage, and create fundamental change where the society is most harmful. One does not necessarily need to change things like saris or traditional garments worn by the women. However, by allowing widows to continue to wear their red and their jewelry, one is saying that the death of the husband does not necessarily mean the death of his wife. Similarly, as it stands, anyone's caste can be "read" by knowing the person's last name. By beginning to intermarry between castes, this inscription will begin to become meaningless, and those who commit suicide because the one they love is in a different caste may not feel so forlorn. In general, what is important about Bodies-Cities is that it admits to the position of the individual body within a greater web of external factors.

In general, by making the inscription of "girl" a less oppressive and damning title, women of the Terai as well as all over the world will be more free to determine their own futures.

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Interview at the Gautam Nun's Monastery, April 16, 8:30am

Interview, April 22, 2015; Mahilwar, Lumbini, 2:00pm, home of Subhanti Jha

Interview, April 17, 2015; Lumbini, 8:00pm, Peace Grove Institute.

Interview at the Peace Grove Institute, April 15, 2015, 11:30am

Interview, April 15, 2015. Rupandehi District Police Office, 3:00pm

Interview, April 15, Women's Development Organization, Bhairahawa, 1pm

Focus Group, April 21, Karuna Girls' College, Lumbini, 12pm

Interview, April 21, Mahilwar, Outside by the water pump, 1:00pm



For future research I really do urge people to go to the Terai. The idea of the Terai as being a border town could certainly be explored more, as could its multiple religions. Focusing specifically on some of the nuns and their families could also be very interesting, and show the generational differences for girls in the Terai.