

Gender Differences in Young Adults' Participation in Choosing their Spouse within Marriage in Nepal

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Abstract

This paper examines whether migration experience, education, employment, and household wealth influence men's and women's participation in choosing their spouse differently in Nepal using *Chitwan Valley Family Study* data. I treat decision-making about spousal choice as three distinct non-ordered types of participation arrangement – no- and sole-participation of respondents, and joint-participation of parent and respondent. The combined result of age at marriage, education, and employment indicate that young adults' ability to make decisions about spouse selection without any input from their parents might not represent higher agency in their decision-making about life choices, as often assumed. Choosing spouse with joint discussion with parents is distinctly different than the process of making sole decisions about their spouse for women. It appears they use their educational achievement as an incentive and tool to discuss a mutually acceptable spouse. Even educated young men with stable salaried jobs still prefer to enter into mutually-approved marriages.

Significance and Goal of the Study:

In the changing economic and socio-cultural environment of developing countries, youths' ability to make decisions about their marriage is increasingly becoming an important marker of a successful transition to adulthood. Young adults are considered to have taken adult roles successfully when they acquire appropriate amounts of human and social capital, gain the knowledge and means to sustain health during adulthood, and are capable of making personal choices.

Following this idea, it can be argued that young men's and women's ability to decide on the appropriate time to get married and participate in choosing their spouse could be a marker of their agency in societies where traditionally parents/family members made these decisions. In this paper, I refer to the concept of *agency* as young adults' ability to obtain information and resources, and develop a sense of self and of personal competence, to make independent and strategic life choices that are made with individual control and will improve the young adults' well-being (Jejeebhoy et al. 2012; Kabeer 1999; National Research Council and Institute of Medicine 2005). Based on these definitions of agency and successful transition to adulthood, one can suggest that educational achievement, employment and migration experience are important factors that provide youths with economic, social, and human capital to inform life decisions and thus, increase their agency (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine 2005; Jejeebhoy 1995; Jampaklay, A. 2003; 2006).

Therefore I examine how these factors influence young adults' participation in choosing their spouse in the context of Nepal, a country where marriage has traditionally been arranged by family members. This aspect of marital decision-making has not received as much attention as timing of marriage and has only slowly started receiving attention in the demographic literature but is still understudied (Allendorf and Ghimire 2012; Ghimire et al. 2006; Jejeebhoy et al. 2012).

Existing ethnographic research in particular has highlighted two important aspects of spousal decision-making in societies where arranged marriages have been normative. First, the process of decision-making should not be dichotomized as self-choice vs. arranged marriage, but rather should take into account the complex negotiation process between individuals and their parents or family members. Second, the process of spousal choice has important implications for subsequent gender relationships within marriage, including domestic violence, as well as intergenerational relationships (Grover 2009; Netting 2010; Puri, Shah, and Tamang 2010; Rocca et al. 2009; Sharangpani 2010)

This study will add to the literature on marital union and transition to adulthood by examining the effect of young adults' educational experience, employment experience, and migration experience on their participation in choosing spouse. Furthermore, I incorporate information on youths' changing ideas about marriage as well as the cultural context of South Asia to propose a categorical conceptualization of spousal choice that includes three distinct non-ordered types of respondent participation: (1) decision made with no participation of the young adult and made solely by parents/relatives, (2) decision made only by the young adults, and (3) decision involving both young adults and their parents/relatives. This conceptualization allows me to understand whether complete self-choice marriage is indicative of higher agency in young adults'

decision-making ability as often assumed. I do so by examining how sole participation is influenced by factors such as migration, education, and employment status, which presumably provide youths with idea and resources to exercise their agency. Using the same results, I also examine whether complete self-choice marriages (which I refer to as sole participation in this paper) are different than those self-choice marriages involving parental decision-making for women. These two categories of participation have often been combined in earlier studies on women's spousal choice participation for two reasons. First, very few women got married with complete sole participation and second, it was assumed that for women, any type of self-choice in the participation of spouse would operate in the same way and reflect higher agency in making marital decisions. The higher proportion of women getting married with sole participation in my sample allows me to treat this category separately in this study.

In addition, since my sample includes a considerable number of men and women married with all three types of participation, I am able to compare how marriages with these three types of participation differ between males and females, which has not been done before because of data constraints. This approach will be relevant to understanding gender differences in spousal selection in the South Asian setting.

Method and Analysis

I utilize rich and complex data from Chitwan Valley [Nepal] Family study that employs ethnographic and survey research methods to gather individual life histories (retrospective data) and prospective longitudinal data that cover a period of rapid social change in western Chitwan, Nepal between 1940 and 2008. I combine the life history calendar with corresponding cross-sectional datasets compiled at the individual level in 1996 and 2008, and household level in 1996, 2001, and 2006. This combined file provides a *married yearly panel* sample of 701 respondents - 367 females (52%) and 334 males (48%) with yearly information on their migration experience, age at marriage, ethnicity, educational attainment, employment status, and household physical capital since 1996 when they were unmarried until the year of their marriage. I use respondents' answers to two questions on spousal choice to create the categorical variable reflecting three types of spousal choice participation: (1) no individual participation and only parents chose the spouse (2) both parent and individual were involved regardless of each party's influence, (3) sole individual participation and parents were not involved.

This conceptualization treats the outcome as three different types entailing distinct processes. Therefore, I run a multinomial logistic regression model, a statistical technique particularly appropriate for discrete dependent variables that allows for a comparison of categorical outcomes through a series of contrasts. I run two models each for the pooled, male and female samples to examine gender differences. In both models, I examine the effect of young men's and women's premarital migration experience, educational attainment, employment experience until the year before marriage on their spousal choice participation. I also include age at marriage, ethnicity, exposure to media before 1996, and household assets as control variables.

Results and Discussion:

In this extended abstract, I present the relevant findings in terms of predicted probability of having no participation, joint participation, and sole participation based on the relevant covariates to make the interpretation easier. I also present the descriptive statistics of the different covariates by the three types of spousal choice participation for males and females in Table 1.

Both descriptive and multivariate results show that males are more likely than females to have sole participation in choosing their spouse in comparison to having joint or no participation as expected. However, it is important to note that almost similar proportion of men (41 %) and women (39%) have joint participation in this sample.

The effect of education and employment on spousal choice participation is notable and shows the importance of separating out the three types of participation. As seen in figure 1, for men and women, the likelihood of having joint participation in spousal choice increases with each additional year of education. For men, this relationship is stronger as seen by the steeper slope of the predicted probability curve than for men. Educational achievement seems to decrease the likelihood of getting married without any involvement in spousal choice process to some degree for men but this decrease occurs in higher increments for women as seen by the negative steeper slope of predicted probability curve. As for sole participation, women with lower levels of education show higher probability of having this type of participation but as they get more educated, there is a sharp decrease in the probability. For men, increase in education decreases the likelihood of getting married with sole participation but this decrease is in smaller increments. These results reflect the descriptive results (shown in Table 1) that both men and women married with sole participation had significantly lower level of education than those who married with no participation and joint participation. At the same time, men and women who jointly decided on their spouse had the highest level of average education before the year of marriage.

As for employment experience, having either wage or salaried employment seems to be important for men to have joint discussion and participation about their future marital partner. For women, only salaried jobs increased her ability to have similar decision-making ability about her future spouse (see Table 2). The predicted probability of getting married with three types of spousal choice participation based on salaried and wage job in the year before marriage also shows that having any type of employment increases the predicted probability of having joint participation than having sole participation for men.

I had hypothesized that if sole participation is a reflection of higher agency, then young adults with migration experience, higher educational attainment, and employment experience should be more likely to have sole participation in the choice of their spouse. On the other hand, young adults with these characteristics will be more likely to have joint participation in the choice of their spouse if they perceive having joint participation in choosing their partners to be a better reflection of their agency. I had built this hypothesis based on my definition of agency and prior literature on the influence of age at marriage, migration, education, and employment on young adults' decision-making within marriage.

Apart from these results on education and employment, the likelihood of getting married with sole participation decreases for young men and women with an increase in age, while getting married with discussion with parents increases with age (results not shown). This increase is significant and higher in magnitude for women than for men. Given that youths who marry early in life are more likely to forego completion of education and opportunities for stable employment, and thus are likely to have lower agency in negotiating their spousal choice.

The combined results regarding age at marriage, education, and employment show that sole participation in choosing a spouse may not necessarily indicate a higher level of agency in making decisions for young adults. This result along with existing knowledge from ethnographic

and mixed-method studies suggests that education provides the incentive as well as the environment for women to discuss their spousal choice with parents. It also shows that joint participation in spousal choice is a better reflection of women's agency than sole participation in decision-making (Bhatti and Jeffery 2012; Jeffery et al. 2012; Netting 2010; Sharangpani 2010). Making joint decisions about one's future husband is a beneficial strategy on the part of educated young women to continue their education and/or their career prospects after marriage in the Nepali context.

The effect of education and employment on men's participation in choosing their spouse is equally important. Unlike earlier studies (Malhotra 1991, Ghimire et al. 2006), the results show that education does significantly influence men's decision to choose spouse in discussion with their parents. The fact that higher education increase men's joint participation but decreases their sole participation in choosing their spouse indicates that educated men not only have the ability to discuss their choice of spouse with parents but prefer to do so. Furthermore, men with salaried jobs who have considerable financial independence still choose to have joint participation rather than sole participation in choosing their future spouse. Given that educated men are more likely to prefer educated wives who might be keen on continuing their careers after marriage (results from another study on the same sample), these men might be securing future parental support by choosing to get parental approval for spouses they may have already chosen.

As for gender differences in spousal choice participation, it is important to acknowledge that because of the gender and societal norms around the meaning of family control and marriage, men will always have higher participation in choosing their spouse than women. However, the fact that a greater number of women are getting married by discussing spousal choice with their parents and a lower number of women are getting married without any say in their spouse's choice because of education shows that education is changing the process of marriage for women in Nepal.

Overall, the results from this chapter echo the ethnographic accounts of young men's and young women's struggle between achieving successful marriage with personal choice and keeping up with the traditional notions of family-making espoused by their society (Fuller and Narasimhan 2008; Mody 2002; Netting 2010; Williams 2012). The young adults want to achieve marital goals of intimacy, equality between husband-wife, and personal choice in relationship. At the same time, they do not want to break the inter-generational ties with both men's and women's family members to assure kin support. Therefore, this study also emphasizes the need to shift from the individual-centric approach and to incorporate the role of families in studying young adults' entry into marriage and successful transition to adulthood in developing countries.

Table 7.3. Descriptive Statistics (Mean or Proportion within each covariate) of the different Covariates by three Categories of Spousal Choice and Gender, Married Panel Sample, CVFS 1996-2008

Covariates	Female			Male		
	No Participation	Joint Participation	Sole participation	No Participation	Joint Participation	Sole participation
Migration Experience (until the year before marriage)						
Never Migrated (Ref)	41.5	38.24	20.26	15.97	39.58	44.44
Ever Migrated	40.98	44.26	14.75	14.21	42.11	43.68
Age at Marriage (Mean in years)	20.99	22.49	19.89	24.36	24.85	23.05
Ethnicity						
Upper-Caste Hindu	46.5	42.5	11	19.32	51.14	29.55
Hill Tibeto-Burmese & Newar	35.44	36.71	27.85	4.84	32.26	62.9
Lower-Caste Hindu & Terai Tibeto-Burmese	35.23	34.09	30.68	13.54	28.13	58.33
Education (year before marriage)						
Enrolled in school	40.34	43.18	16.48	13.79	46.55	39.66
Highest level of education in years (mean)	7.69	8.59	5.75	8.6	9.8	7.9
Yearly Employment Status (year before marriage)						
No paid employment	43.2	40.8	16	17.44	38.95	43.6
Employed in Wage job	41.84	29.59	28.57	8.51	38.3	53.19
Employed in Salaried job	15.79	68.42	15.79	13.91	45.22	40.87
Self-employed in business	45	45	10	15.38	50	34.62
Exposure to New Ideas (until 1996)						
Ever watched video	37.98	42.31	19.71	15.65	39.69	44.66
Ever involved in youth club	46.67	33.33	20	13.86	45.54	40.59
Household Physical Capital (year before marriage)						
Total land in sqrt Katthas	5.54	5.1	5.16	5.71	5.15	4.92
Live Stock Unit (sqrt)	1.33	1.41	1.37	1.3	1.39	1.25
Household Good Unit (sqrt)	0.91	0.99	0.76	1.16	1.09	0.93
Observations (N) and % of respondents in each spousal choice category						
	152 (41%)	144 (39%)	71 (20%)	50 (15%)	137 (41%)	144 (44%)

Table 2. Predicted Probability of Type of Respondents' Participation in the Selection of their First Spouse by Migration Experience and Employment Status for Males and Females, Married Yearly Panel Sample. CVFS 1996-2008.

	Female			Male		
	Employment Status			Employment Status		
	No Paid Job	Wage Job	Salaried Job	No Paid Job	Wage Job	Salaried Job
No participation	0.44	0.49	0.17	0.17	0.06	0.12
Joint Participation	0.41	0.33	0.49	0.38	0.49	0.45
Sole Participation	0.15	0.17	0.34	0.45	0.45	0.43

Figure 1. Predicted Probability of having three types of Participation in Spousal choice, by Gender and Education, *Married Yearly Panel Sample*. CVFS 1996-2008

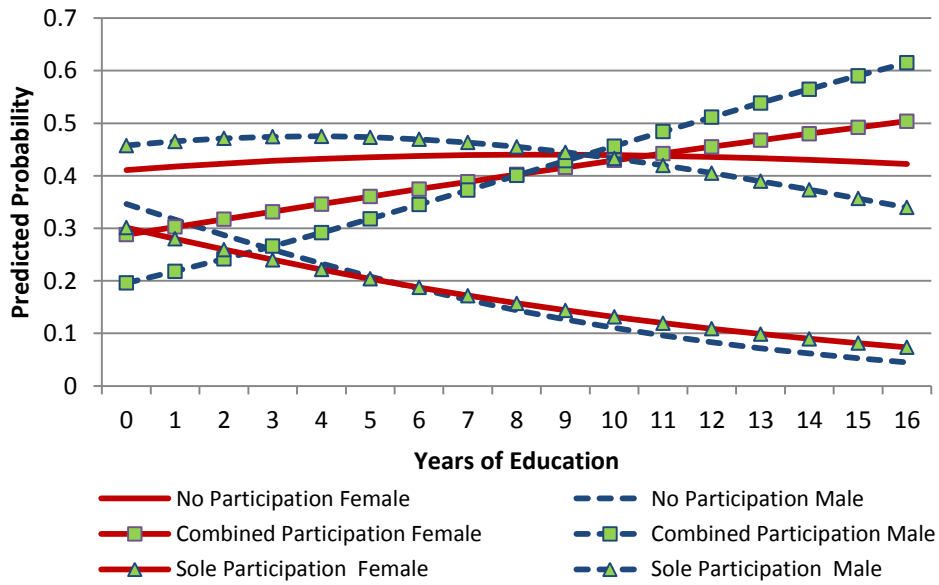


Figure 7.2. Predicted Probability of Getting Married with Three Participation Types, by Gender and Age, *Married Yearly Panel Sample*. CVFS 1996-2008

