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Semi-arranged marriages and dowry ambivalence: Tensions in the changing landscape of marriage formation in South Asia

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Abstract

Marriage is a point of change in young people's lives, especially in regions that place high value on it, such as in South Asian countries including Nepal. However, marriage practices are changing, with a move towards more love marriage; this is likely to have important implications on women's status and agency, household and couple dynamics, and mental and physical health. The aim of paper is to describe how changing marriage formation patterns and traditional practices such as co-residence and dowry are intersecting and impacting relationships post-marriage. In-depth qualitative interviews took place with twenty intact triads of newly married women, their husbands and their mothers-in-law, in one district of Nepal in 2017. Many marriages remain arranged; however, couples often talk or meet before marriage and feel that they are able to build a foundation of love before marrying. Access to technology facilitates this practice, although some couples are reluctant to admit their communication, suggesting stigma about this practice. Husbands have growing ambivalence about dowry, leading to confusion and negatively impacting on relationships post-marriage. A clash of traditional and modern ideas and practices is occurring in Nepal, influencing newly married women's household status, relationship quality, and potentially impacting women's health.

Keywords

semi-arranged marriage; relationships; communication; dowry; Nepal

Introduction

Marriage practices are changing across South Asia, including in Nepal. Traditionally, most marriages in Nepal were arranged, where parents decided whom their children would marry. However, recent research in Nepal has found evidence of greater young people's

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involvement in their marriage decision-making process and also increased desire for ‘love’ marriages (Ghimire et al. 2006).

In spite of these new marriage formation patterns, traditional practices remain, specifically, co-residence with the groom’s family and the practice of dowry (the practice of the bride’s family giving money and gifts to the groom’s family) (Sah 2008). Traditionally, newly married women move in with their in-laws and come under the rule of their mother-in-law, and this persists in many families today, even with love marriages (Allendorf 2017). Marriages also traditionally take place along religious and ethnicity/caste lines in this setting (Thapa 1989). Understanding the nature of changing marriage formation patterns and how this impacts on relationships and the quality of life for newly married women and their co-resident households is important. Better quality relationships between women and their husbands, and also their in-laws, could help improve women’s decision-making power (agency), potentially contributing to women being more able to delay, space and limit childbearing, and access health facilities, improving maternal and child health, among other potential outcomes related to economic, social, and personal empowerment. Better household and couple’s relationship quality also affects women’s overall quality of life and happiness.

Little is known about the new pathways to marriage and what the changing nature of marriage formation means for relationship quality among newly married couples. Qualitative exploration of the ‘schemas’ underlying people’s perceptions of the changing nature of marriage in a village in India near the Nepal border (with many Nepalis living in it) found that respondents (men and women of various ages) saw pros and cons of both love/ elopements and arranged marriages and believed that a hybrid between the two was ideal (Allendorf 2013). Respondents in the same study perceived the drivers behind the changing marriage patterns to include education and technological change, and, to a lesser extent, foreign influence (Allendorf 2013). To our knowledge, no other recent study has explored people’s individual experiences with these changes and sought to understand what these changes might mean for relationships, especially those including the broader household unit.

It has been hypothesised that couples who have more decision-making power in their marriage process (choice of partner) may have higher quality marriages (Coltabiano and Castiglioni 2008). Respondents in the qualitative study mentioned above (in a village of India near the Nepal border) thought that women would be more likely to have better relationships with her husband’s family if the family had a role in the marriage decision-making process, but a better relationship between the couples would exist with a love marriage or elopement (Allendorf 2013). Quantitative evidence has suggested that marital relationship quality is higher when women and men have more decision-making power in the choice of their spouse (Allendorf and Ghimire 2013).

Higher quality relationships be they with husbands or other family members, such as in-laws, are important for many aspects of women’s lives, from their health to their level of empowerment and agency. Here we apply the definition of quality used by Allendorf (2012), encompassing love, affection and support (Allendorf 2012). Higher quality relationships are theorised to increase women’s empowerment, since women in higher quality relationships

may be more able to participate in decision-making because both the family is more willing to respond to her wishes, and she feels more comfortable stating her desires. It should be noted that household structure (co-resident or not) is not static, and over the course of a couple's marriage, they may at times live with the husband's parents (usually at the beginning), then later on live on their own, before again co-residing with their own grown children and grandchildren.

Co-residence with in-laws has been widely practised for generations and it is known that mothers-in-law are key decision-makers and influence health, as discussed below. However, there is little research on mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship dynamics and what contributes to positive or negative relationships between women and their mothers-in-law. Overwhelmingly, the relationship with mothers-in-law is assumed to be negative, or at least rife with conflict (Allendorf 2017). For example, qualitative work on reasons for domestic violence against pregnant women in Nepal found that both women and men thought that mothers-in-law perpetrated violence; mothers-in-law however claimed that daughters-in-law abused them (Pun et al. 2016). Other qualitative research in Nepal has suggested that the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship is not necessarily always negative, and there is much diversity in the quality of this complex relationship, with some mother-in-law/daughter-in-law dyads having positive and loving relationships (Allendorf 2017).

Relationship quality is important in-and-of itself, as it likely leads to more positive everyday interactions, improving social and emotional health for those in the household. Additionally, relationship quality with husbands and in-laws is also important for women's physical health since decisions are most often made at the household level in South Asia. Women who have better relationships with their husbands and in-laws may be better able to advocate for the health services and behaviours that they want to avail through increased empowerment, agency, and decision-making power (Char, Saavala, and Kulmala 2010). (Allendorf 2012). Past research in Nepal has found mothers-in-law to play important roles in women's use of prenatal services and breastfeeding (Simkhada, Porter, and van Teijlingen 2010)(Masvie 2006). Relationship quality with husbands is also associated with greater women's autonomy and more health care seeking behaviour in Nepal (Furuta and Salway 2006; Mullany, Hindin, and Becker 2005).

Dowry is common in Nepal, particularly in the Terai region, although it is officially illegal (Niraula and Morgan 1996). In most countries that historically had dowry, it has faded with time, but in South Asia dowry has increased in recent years. There are two competing theories about the purpose of dowry in South Asia. The first is that dowry is a "price" for a good groom, and thus, in a setting of uneven sex ratios (fewer women) and women "marrying up", dowry would persist (Arunachalam and Logan 2016). The second theory is that dowry is a method of bequeathing money to daughters in a setting where women cannot inherit money, and thus adds protection to daughters (Arunachalam and Logan 2016). (Srinivasan and Lee 2004). Evidence in Nepal has found insufficient dowry to be a contributor to domestic violence (Pun et al. 2016; Ruchira Tabassum Naved and Persson 2010).

Little is known qualitatively about the nature of the changing pattern of marriage formation in Nepal, especially how changing marriage practices, dowry and the quality of life of newly married couples intersect in the early days of marriage. Marriage in South Asia is an institution in which gender, sexual and intergenerational power dynamics play out, especially for newly married women who often face requirements such as eating last, not interacting with elders, bearing children soon, adhering to expectations about sexual intimacy and, as George states, having their bodies “taken over by the community ... to establish and legitimize its image in society (George 2002, 209). By understanding how these relationships are built we can understand how to support the growth of high quality and equitable relationships.

Women’s social, emotional and physical health is influenced by different levels of factors, including her standing in her household, which is influenced by household relationships and dynamics, which are influenced by community level norms and practices. Above all of these are the influences of societal and cultural level factors such as gender norms, patriarchal practices, caste and religious expectations, etc. The nature of these relationships will also influence women’s social and emotional health and happiness through increasing her agency. We define agency as Kabeer (1999) has outlined, comprised of women’s ability to both conceive of and achieve the life she desires (Kabeer 1999). Past scholars have used terms such as “intimacy” to describe what we are calling “relationship quality”, which is theorised to increase women’s agency (Brault and Schensul 2018; De Neve 2016)..

The primary aim of this paper is to explore newly married couple’s experiences and feelings regarding their marriage and relationship quality at the start of their marriages, in light of shifting and differing marriage formation processes. A second aim is to, understand how differing marriage formation processes affect the mother-in-law/husband/daughter-in-law’s triadic and dyadic relationship quality. Findings will contribute to our understanding of the experiences of newly married households in a time of societal transition at a key point in the family formation process when household relationship dynamics are being determined.

Methods

Procedures

Sixty in-depth interviews (20 each with newly married women, their husbands and mothers-in-law) were carried out in Nawalparasi district of Nepal in February–April, 2017. Women were eligible to participate if they were married within the last 3 months, were between the ages of 18–25 years and were co-residing with a mother-in-law, as is the dominant practice in this area. Additionally, husbands and mothers-in-law both had to be present in the households (not migrated or living elsewhere).

To identify newly married households, we conducted a mapping of households in two Village Development Committees (administrative units). Community leaders, such as female community health volunteers (FCHVs), teachers, health workers and religious leaders, helped identify households with newly married couples. After the mapping, a list of newly married households within 3 months was prepared in both the village development committees. A total of 34 households were identified. Each household was visited to check

for eligibility. Four daughters-in-laws had gone to their maternal home and two newly married husbands had already left for work abroad. Thus, the eligible list narrowed down to 28 households. One of the mothers-in-law did not consent to participate in the study, so that household was excluded. A protocol was developed based on the previous research experience of the research team, and separate tailored guidelines were used for each participant that covered similar themes. Informed consent was obtained from all three household members before any interviews were conducted, starting with the daughter-in-law to ensure she was comfortable. Where necessary, verbal consent was obtained from the father-in-law/household head before approaching other household members.

Interviews were conducted by trained Nepali interviewers of the same sex as respondents in a private location of the respondents' choice, usually inside the home or in a nearby field. Interviews with the majority of respondents were conducted in their local language, Awadhi. Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and an hour and a half. All interviews were audiotape recorded, transcribed into Nepali and then translated into English.

Interviewers were trained research assistants who work full time for the research partner organization and have experience conducting qualitative interviews with women and men on topics related to health, including sensitive topics. The male interviewer was in his twenties and interviewed the young husbands (also in their twenties). One of the female interviewers was in her early thirties while other was in her late thirties. One of the interviewers was from the same region as where the data collection took place, and the other two had previous experience working in that region, as well as language and context familiarity. The same female interviewer interviewed each daughter-in-law/mother-in-law dyad. Interviewers received a 3-day training, which included refreshers on qualitative interview methods and approaches, as well as detailed discussion of qualitative guides and aims of the study. We strove to consider the positionality of the interviewers in relationship to the respondents, who were less educated, poorer and from a specific cultural region of the country, by engaging interviewers of the same sex and similar age, who were familiar with the region and language, and had previous experience conducting qualitative interviews about sensitive topics and received additional training specific to this population and these topics. Demographic descriptors of the study population can be found in Table 1.

Data analysis

Data were analysed both with consideration of the individual and of the household triad (woman, husband, mother-in-law). While not triadic in the sense of all three family members being interviewed together (as the extension of the traditional interpretation of “dyadic interviews” would suggest (Morgan et al. 2013), we included the relationship between the three individually collected perspectives as an additional layer of information.

Data were analysed using Atlas-ti. Interviews were analysed using a grounded theory approach, with initial codes based on the interview guide (Corbin and Strauss 2008). We used grounded theory only in the coding stage and not in the data collection phase, due to the need to collect data as soon after marriage as possible and the fact that Nepal has a narrow marriage season, and thus challenges obtaining all three household member's interviews close together (Heydarian 2016). Coding was conducted by 3 members of the

research team, two who are based in the USA (NDS, NP) and one from Nepal (MD). After an initial coding of a small set of interviews (2 from each respondent type), coders carefully compared coded transcripts and discussed coding approaches, discrepancies where they emerged, and needed additional codes. Discrepancies were discussed until consensus was reached. Additional themes emerged and related codes were added to reflect those themes. At that point another subset of interviews was coded by all coders, again discussed for needed codebook refinement and to ensure inter-coder reliability, and then all remaining interviews were coded by one coder each (divided up between coders). After coding individually, interviews were then re-read as intact triads (newly married woman, husband and mother-in-law), and codes under the same themes were read all together, grouped by household. Additional coding was also conducted at this point for themes that had not arisen in the individual level coding process.

The research received human subjects approval from both the Nepal Health Research Council and the University of California, San Francisco.

Results

Marriage Decision-making process

Based on the descriptions of marriages given by the respondents themselves, we grouped the marriage decision-making process into three main categories. The first category was arranged marriages, where families were the primary actors involved in the marriage decision-making process and the couple did not meet, or met only through formal ceremonies, before marriage. The second was love marriages, where the couple met and decided to get married before (or without) approaching their families. The third was a new category, which we called “semi-arranged” marriages, where the families arranged the marriage, but the couple talked and/or met outside of the formal engagement ceremony between engagement and marriage.

In our sample, 10 couples had strict arranged marriages. Three couples had not met at all before marriage, and 7 couples had met one time (usually at an engagement ceremony) before marriage. These arranged marriages were often conducted without either member of the couple’s involvement, and was at times against their wishes, as one respondent explained,

“My father and mother did not ask my opinion regarding my marriage. We need to get married according to their wish. We have to obey whatever they tell us. I only came to know that I was about to get married when his father and uncle came to see me. I did not know anything before that. In our community, even though we do not wish to get married, we are not able to say anything to the family. We need to follow whatever our family decides. But I did not wish to get married any time soon.” (Ranju Kumari, Newly married woman, Age 18)¹.

¹Pseudonyms are used after quotes to better link household respondents by the newly married woman’s name and relationship to her.

The respondent in this quote appeared to see marriage as a family and community obligation, rather than something related to her own personal agency or choice.

Five of the couples had semi-arranged marriages, where they talked or met a few times between the time of the engagement and marriage. Two additional couples had known each other for some time through family or friends before marriage, although the marriage itself was arranged. Since some engagements were many years long, which allowed those couples to get to know each other over time, and some were able to build the foundation of love before the time of marriage. Most respondents with semi-arranged marriages described their conversations with their prospective spouse as being about day-to-day activities. As one husband described:

“We used to talk about some private things. Then, we talked about our likes and dislikes, our education, homework and exams. We also used to talk about our family, health and other daily activities... We also fell in love in that 3 years’ time.” (Pinki’s Husband, Age 21).

Similarly, a newly married woman explained:

“My brother’s wife asked my husband for his contact number and since then we used to talk with each other over the phone... We met for 2 times since then we started to talk properly. He always used to say that he will only marry me, meaning that we were on the right path; therefore, nobody could do anything to interrupt our marriage. We were meant to be a couple that’s why our marriage happened successfully.” (Kalyani devi, newly married woman, Age 18)

These two quotes stand in stark contrast to the experience of the woman in the strict arranged marriage above (Ranju Kumari), as these respondents mention the word “love” and wanting to marry only each other (language that was not used by respondents in strict arranged marriages). What this suggests is that some couples who have arranged marriages that are, by nature, family and community events, are able to turn this process into a personal and romantic experience through the process of communication prior to marriage. Essentially, the couples in semi-arranged marriages have agency over what happens to them after the engagement, even if they had limited agency over the decision about who to marry itself.

Interestingly, there were a number of instances where there was a discrepancy between the husband and wife’s description of their interactions before marriage. In some cases, the woman admitted to talking before marriage, and the husband claimed they did not, and *vice versa*. Some even accused the other of calling them repeatedly, but refusing to answer the call (again, going in both directions). For example, one husband explained, “No, I neither talked to her nor went to meet her. She used to call me, but I didn’t receive [accept] her call.” (Gita’s Husband, Age 19) His wife however had a different perspective, suggesting that communication was secretive, and highlighting a tension between the traditional practice of arranged marriage without communication before marriage and modern practices of communication,

“We used to have conversations on the telephone. I used to get scared when he used to call me, so I used to hang up...He used to call me and ask me about my whereabouts. He used to call me once in every 16-17 days. He used to call me when I was at home. I did not speak to him in front of everyone. I used to talk to him when I was alone.” (Gita, Newly married woman, Age 18).

This could be evidence of shame about communicating before marriage, which could have been heightened or diminished by the fact that the interviewers were outsiders.

A minority of respondents (N=3) had love marriages, meeting through family events or friends, and subsequently establishing relationships over the phone or even through Facebook. These were the only types of marriages where the women had a say in the marriage decision-making process, whereas most men had some say even in arranged and semi-arranged marriages. Even though these were viewed as love marriages, the couples did not have the same process of dating and falling in love as in other contexts, and families were still involved in the ultimate decision to get married. One newly married woman with a love marriage describes her experience with meeting her husband,

“He had gone to a neighbour’s wedding. I was studying in 7th grade at that time. We talked for a bit at that time and later he sent me a request [to be Facebook friends], and I felt that it was him on Facebook. Then we started to talk on Facebook. I fell in love with him when I was studying in class 9. At that time, I used to talk with him through my uncle’s phone, my elder brothers’ phone... And after that, our talks went further ahead...But there were no meetings between us. Then we met with each other after 4 years. We married within 25 days after we had met.” (Sarita, Newly married woman, Age 18)

One household was an outlier in our study: A husband and a wife both described a traditional arranged marriage in the interview. However, in the interview with the mother-in-law, it came to light that it was in fact a love marriage and that actually the woman had previously been married and had left her prior husband and child to come marry her current husband. The couple themselves did not feel comfortable sharing this in the formal interview, suggesting some residual discomfort with having had a love marriage and/or discomfort with the interviewer.

Dowry and household relationship quality

Dowry was given in most women’s marriages (regardless of type of marriage). As one mother-in-law explained, “We had the discussion regarding the dowry since there is no question of marriage without discussions regarding dowry (Gita’s Mother-in-law, Age 50).” In marriages where a large dowry was given, women often described being treated well by their husband and in-laws, and not being asked to work (cook food or clean clothes) in the early days of marriage. In cases where the daughter-in-law brought a very large dowry, the mother-in-law cooked and washed her new daughter-in-law’s clothes, clearly indicating that the new daughter-in-law had a high position in the household. In general, all household members, but most especially the mothers-in-law, reported more positive feelings about the early days of marriage when dowry was given. Despite this, many newly married women felt bad that dowry had to be given, due to the burden on their natal families, and also felt bad

when it had not been given, since it impacted their lives post-marriage. As one woman explained,

“Everyone takes dowry at the time of wedding. I felt bad about it, but I could do nothing as this is followed by everyone in the community. If the daughters are from a poor family their parents will even take out a loan to give dowry to their daughter at their wedding. What to do? A girl is not married in this society if dowry is not given. I felt bad for taking dowry, my father had taken out a loan on order to give me dowry. My father is in debt.” (Ranju Kumari, Newly married woman, Age 18)

Husbands had much more complex and at times mixed feelings about dowry, with about half of them expressing some level of discomfort or feeling “bad” about it. Others expressed happiness about it, felt it was their right, and that it improved family relationships. Some seemed to be trying to blame taking it on “society”, saying that they had to take it because of societal pressure or how people would view their wife and her family if there was no dowry. A few stated that they refused dowry, but many were somewhere in-between and conflicted. Those that were conflicted were balancing their parents’ expectations, their new wife’s families’ expectations, changing social norms, and feelings about how might impact their wife, among other things. One husband described his complex feelings as follows:

“I felt good for my parents [about dowry]. If you talk about me, I was not that happy because they had to pay us to get their daughter married. At school, we study that taking dowry is not a good practice, but I had to take dowry just because it is a practice in our community. If I protest against it, I’ll lose my family support. So, I had mixed feelings, I was happy on one hand but also felt sad for my wife and her family on the other.” (Pinki’s Husband, Age 21)

There were a few households where the husband refused to take dowry. Husbands who did not want to take dowry discussed new norms about whether dowry was a positive thing socially, in some cases based on changing gender norms and ideas that they specifically mentioned having learned about in school or through social media. All of the husbands who mentioned not wanting to take dowry faced resistance from their family, and in some cases, their new wife’s family as well. One husband said that he had a “condition that I would not take anything as a dowry” because

“I think that I should earn on my own and don’t boast anything provided by others. Along with that, the dowry system also is not a favourable system for us, but it has been our practice. But I don’t like this system. So, I clearly told them that I will not be taking anything when I get married.”

This led to some tension with his parents, but ultimately he prevailed

“They opposed at first. But gradually they accepted it.... We shouldn’t take anything without our right and that dowry was not my right. I have married their daughter and she will be my responsibility. I shouldn’t ask them for money showing that I’ve done a favour for marrying their daughter.” (Barsa Devi’s Husband, Age 26)

Of concern, in households where husbands refused to take dowry the newly married women were treated poorly by their in-laws. As Barsa Devi, the wife of the man from the quote above, explained

“They try to dominate me for not bringing any dowry, especially my husband’s sister tries to dominate me a lot. My mother-in-law also frequently gets angry in issues of dowry. It is only in front of the society that I married without dowry but there is a dispute in my family because of dowry. I feel that my mother-in-law and my sister-in-law are not happy with me since I did not bring any dowry.” (Barsa Devi, Newly married woman, Age 18)

The mother-in-law in this same household, on the other hand, claimed that not only had the daughter-in-law’s family been the ones to offer dowry (which she claimed she gave back), but she [mother-in-law] had added additional money of her own for the wedding feast.

Different perspectives about what actually had happened surrounding dowry between mothers-in-law, husbands and daughters-in-law were common among participants. Most mothers-in-law and husbands claimed that the daughter-in-law’s family had offered dowry and they had not requested it, perhaps a reflection of the illegal status of dowry. In contrast, many daughters-in-law said that their husband’s families demanded high dowries. Husbands’ refusal (or stated refusal) only complicated matters and husbands often seemed torn between their mothers/families and their new wives. The inner conflict seen especially in husbands, but with which all respondents in the households struggled, may be a reflection of broader clashes between traditional social practices and new norms evidences in a society in transition.

Discussion

Despite some evidence that the nature of marriage is changing in Nepal, in this study we find that most young Madhesi and Muslim women and men living in the Nawalparasi district have arranged marriages. While many couples with arranged marriages did not meet or talk between the engagement and marriage, some couples were able to begin to form a relationship prior to marriage, generally by talking on the telephone and, in a few cases, meeting in person. Our findings suggest that in these semi-arranged marriages, couples are able to begin building a relationship and these couples seem to have more positive feelings about their marriage and relationships post-marriage compared to ‘strict’ arranged marriages. Some of couples with semi-arranged marriages felt that they had fallen in love through this process, and these couples seemed to have more positive relationships in the early days of marriage.

Our qualitative findings are in line with past quantitative research in Nepal that found that marriages where both the couple and family participated in decision-making had lower odds of dissolution compared to marriages that were strictly arranged or love (Jennings 2016) and also that participating in the choice of marriage partner was associated with better marital relationship quality (Allendorf and Ghimire 2013). It should be noted that our categorisation of “semi-arranged” marriages differs from the concept of “love-cum-arranged” marriages where the couple falls in love and then obtains the permission and approval of their families

before marriage, which has been described in India (Brault and Schensul 2018; De Neve 2016; Fuller and Narasimhan 2008). The semi-arranged marriages in our study were in fact the reverse of “love-cum-arranged” marriages (and could be called “arranged-cum-love” marriages), as couples had their marriages arranged by their families first, and then developed relationships and love between engagement and before marriage.

Technology use pre-marriage, most commonly mobile phones, is the key enabler of communication between young couples. Young couples used mobile phones to get to know each other better before marriage. The love marriages all involved technology, usually mobile phones, with the use of Facebook in one. Past literature has discussed people’s perception that mobile phone were facilitating love marriages, and our findings add to the literature by providing evidence from newly married couples about this practice (Allendorf 2013). It is important to note that the interplay between technology and marriage decision-making patterns might not be straightforward, with some previous evidence suggesting that access to technology and media is contributing to young people wanting and having love marriages at very young ages, leading to increases in child marriage (Plan Nepal, Save the Children, and World Vision International, Nepal 2012). However, what is new in this study is the role of technology in semi-arranged marriages—since most of the semi-arranged marriages also involved communication by phone. It seems that mobile phones are allowing young couples to still remain within the bounds of acceptable behaviour (not interacting in person) while beginning to build relationships and fall in love before marriage. Past literature in India found that mobile phone communication (and meeting in person) allowed couples who were set up through family/match makers to get to know each other before the official engagement took place, and that families encouraged this (Netting 2010)(Fuller and Narasimhan 2008). Our findings add to the previous literature by providing evidence from a rural setting in Nepal and find a somewhat similar use for mobile phones. However, in our case, communication occurred after an official engagement, and it was not clear if couples could break things off at that point in time had they wanted to. Furthermore, a few triads mentioned that the new wife talked to her mother-in-law before marriage over the phone as well, highlighting the potential for this medium to build that key relationship before marriage as well.

While some couples were open about the communication between engagement and marriage, other couples had conflicting reports about whether they talked before marriage and who was contacting whom. This suggests that there is still some discomfort with the transition from traditional arranged marriages where couples do not get to know each other before marriage into couples talking before marriage. To our knowledge, this trend, and its possible impact on relationships post-marriage, has not yet been documented in the literature. As mobile phone ownership continues to grow, perhaps this practice will become more socially accepted and young couples.

Dowry continues to be a primary factor contributing to the quality of the relationship post-marriage. While past quantitative studies have found that dowry and satisfaction with dowry were not associated with intimate partner violence, our findings add complexity to previous studies by suggesting that subtler relationship factors may be associated with dowry (Oshiro et al. 2011). Where families perceive that “enough” dowry was given, newly married women

appear to have more decision-making power and better relationships with other family members in the household in the early stages of marriage, especially in cases where there was also some communication between engaged couples before marriage. However, even in cases where there is no household tension with the in-laws about dowry, newly married women bear the emotional burden of guilt about the stress that dowry put on their natal families and resentment over the practice of dowry in their society.

Triadic analysis suggests that newly married women, their husbands and mothers-in-law sometimes have widely different perspectives on the marriage decision-making process, especially related to dowry. One of the primary drivers of this confusion appears to be mixed emotions about dowry, especially on the part of the husbands. This leads to some miscommunication, where husbands express that they do not want or need dowry, but in-laws feel differently, and therefore are unhappy when less than expected (or none) is given. Increased awareness about the negative aspects of dowry, through school, media awareness campaigns or exposure to western media and practices is leading men to reject (or want to reject) dowry. Past quantitative research in Nepal has found that exposure to mass media was associated with having more participation in decision-making about marriage (Ghimire et al. 2006). This may be a reasonable pathway to changing norms about the acceptability of dowry as well. Previous research in Nepal has found that people's attitudes about various marriage-related practices were more strongly tied to their own personal upbringing rather than their current village norm. Therefore focusing on changing community norms might not be the most efficient approach (Barber 2004).

We also found diverging perspectives among family members about the quality of the relationships post-marriage. Often daughters-in-law reported feeling unloved or neglected while the mothers-in-law claimed that they love their new daughter-in-law and tried to treat her well. Again, this may be due to social desirability reporting bias, but it may also be due to the very early nature of these relationships between people who do not know each other and may not understand how each other are feeling or show love. Newly married women and mothers-in-law emphasised the importance of instrumental support (e.g. help with housework) as a sign of love and also checking in about health, particularly if someone was eating enough. Future research should explore the longer-term impacts of relationship quality between newly married women and their in-laws on health and wellbeing, given previous evidence of the importance of couple's relationship quality on a variety of health outcomes in this setting.

There are opportunities for helping couples and families build a stronger relationship, and it is essential in this setting to involve all family members in this process. Interventions that help household members communicate with each other and get to know each other before and after marriage could improve the situation for newly married women. By capitalising on the growing trend of communication between engagement and marriage in semi-arranged marriages, family members could have more knowledge about how best to support each other and show that they care. Interventions that foster communication especially about feelings around dowry may help alleviate tensions. It is critical to address the impact that the ambivalence that husbands have about dowry is having on relationships post-marriage. A limited number of previous interventions have worked with mothers-in-laws to improve the

situation for daughter-in-laws and child health, including on domestic violence in India (Krishnan et al. 2012). Perhaps an adaptation of these approaches to Nepal to address communication and relationships in the early days of marriage could improve the situation for newly married women and their households.

Limitations

As with all qualitative research, findings from this study are not generalisable to the broader Nepali or other South Asian context. However, given evidence of similar changing marriage trends across Nepal and other parts of South Asia, they may shed light on the experiences of other new couples and households. Findings may not be generalisable in other ways, as this part of Nepal has high rates male out-migration, and in our study households where all three members of the triad (newly married woman, her husband, and mother-in-law) were not currently in the country were excluded. Additionally, we only focused on co-resident households, and not all new couples co-reside, especially immediately after marriage. However, having a narrow focus was necessary in order to deeply explore into these complex topics, and findings may be relevant to other rural co-residing households in this area, which is still the dominant trend.

Conclusion

Newly married couples and their households in Nepal face conflicting realities. Although literature has explored the tension between “modern” and “traditional” practices, and some have argued that this theme has been thoroughly discussed, we feel that this conflict is important to continue to understand, as it is changing and the transition process itself may have important consequences for people’s lives (van Wessel 2012). We are therefore adding to previous literature in South Asia that specifically explores the tension between “modern” and “traditional” practices related to gender norms, which is especially useful when exploring viewpoints held by members of different generations - in this case, newlyweds compared to members of their parents’ generation (Iyer 2018).

Findings point to two primary conflicts during the marriage decision-making process that could be inhibiting the development of higher quality relationships post-marriage. First, the nature of the marriage formation process is changing, with more communication, made easier by access to technology, potentially leading to better relationships post-marriage. Increased access and use of technology may be increasing young women’s, and even young men’s, agency in their households and relationships, as it allows them to act more on their own desires to communicate that has been traditionally allowed in this society. However, while couples are able to get to know each other before marriage, there is still fear of society’s perception of this practice, potentially limiting the extent to which relationships can form.

Second, traditional practices such as dowry persist, fuelled by fears of social expectations (or at least the perception of social expectations). Some young people, mainly men, are starting to question the practice, but these complex emotions are leading to miscommunication and may impact on relationships post-marriage. These findings highlight that the process of change may lead to a mix of modern and traditional practices, which,

while allowing for some increases in agency, ultimately may leave young couples restricted or at least conflicted, and not able to act upon their actual desires. This conflict may have unanticipated outcomes that may in the longer-term impact demographic processes and health outcomes.

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Table 1:

Participants

	Newly Married women	Newly married husbands	Mothers-in-laws
Age: mean (range)	19 (18-22)	23 (18-31)	48 (36-63)
Education			
Illiterate/informal	1	0	13
1-5/literate	6	3	6
6-8	5	4	0
9-12	7	8	1
More than 12	1	4	0
Ethnicity			
Muslim	8	8	8
Madhesi	12	12	12
Occupation			
Homemaker/unemployed	16	3	8
Student	4	3	0
Agriculture/daily wage	0	3	10
Small business/teacher/other	0	11	2