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Ethnicity, Marriage and Marital Status in Nepal

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Abstract

The trends and patterns of marriage and marital status are gradually changing worldwide, including in Nepal. These changes are influenced by various factors, including age, education, employment, income, and ethnic background. This paper examines the evolving patterns of marriage and marital status among individuals in Nepal over the past 25 years (one generation), utilizing longitudinal data from the Nepal Living Standard Survey (NLSS) spanning from 1995/96 to 2022/23. Nepali society is undergoing a progressive shift from traditional to modern and from underdeveloped to developing, as socio-economic changes take effect. This paper argues that as long as ethnic diversity persists within the population, noticeable differences in marital status will continue to exist across ethnic groups, underscoring a significant association between ethnicity and marital status. Consequently, marriage and marital practices are primarily shaped by the social and cultural differences of various ethnic groups within the broader population, including Hill Caste, Mountain/Hill Janajati, Madheshi/Tarai Caste, Mountain/Hill Dalit, Madhesh/Tarai Janajati, Madhesh/ Tarai Dalit, and various religious and linguistic groups.

Keywords

Ethnicity, Marriage, Marital status, Nepal.

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1. Ethnic Groups and Ethnicity

The concepts of ethic and ethnicity have been widely discussed worldwide, including in Nepal, over the past few decades. These ideas originated alongside the process of modern development in Europe, America, and beyond, though they have a longer historical foundation. While the concepts are now debated globally, the focus and nuances vary in different regions. Before delving into the concept of ethnicity specifically within the Nepalese context, it is worthwhile to examine how various scholars have contributed to its conceptualization.

Banton (2015) provides a thorough examination of the origins and expansion of "ethnic" and "ethnicity". His insights shed light on these conceptual issues. Banton (2015) references ***The Social Systems of American Ethnic Groups***, a 1945 publication by W. Lloyd Warner and Leo Srole, which used the term "ethnic group" to describe eight cultural minorities of the white "race" residing in Massachusetts, who were perceived as progressing toward becoming "one hundred percent Americans" (p. 96). However, the concept of ethnicity was absent in their discussion. Banton (2015: 96) further clarifies:

> *The authors made no mention of 'ethnicity'; the first recorded use of that word is dated from 1953, when the sociologist David Riesman referred to 'the groups who, by reason of rural or small-town location, ethnicity, or other parochialism, feel threatened by the better educated upper-middle-class people'. Whether or not he intended this, Riesman's change from the adjective 'ethnic' to the noun 'ethnicity' implied that there was some distinctive quality in the sharing of a common ethnic origin that explained why people such as those he referred to might feel threatened by upper-middle-class people, who, apparently, did not attach the same significance to their own ethnic origins. They did not count as 'ethnics'.*

The term ethnic was initially defined to categorize people based on origin and history. Over time, the concept evolved to encompass a

sense of "we-feeling" - the sense of identity and connection individuals feel with their ethnic group. This classification of people based on distinct individual and collective characteristics has since spread globally. Banton (2015: 99) continues:

> *In the English language, the adjective 'ethnic' came into use initially to identify a certain kind of social group or category and as an improvement on some questionable uses of the word 'race'. It aided the growth of practical knowledge. One stimulus was a book of 1935 that was designed to explain to a popular readership how in Nazi Germany a kind of racial theory with pre-Darwinian origins was being used in a scientifically unjustifiable manner. Julian Huxley and A. C. Haddon maintained that 'ethnic group' would be a better name for the physical categories that bore names like Slav, Mediterranean, Nordic and Alpine; they thought it should replace the word 'race'.*

As noted, in 1950 an expert committee convened by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) advised that *"it would be better when speaking of human races to drop the term 'race' altogether and speak of ethnic groups."* This marked a shift toward defining ethnic groups as social categories that transcend national boundaries, aiming to correct doctrines previously claimed to be scientific (Banton, 2015: 99). Over time, the conceptualization of ethnicity has expanded, encompassing broader contexts and dimensions. Banton (2015) suggests that the notion of ethnicity evolved in response to these changes.

References to ethnic groups soon gave rise to discussions on ethnicity itself. Ethnicity: Theory and Experience, edited by Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan, became highly influential in this regard. The volume stemmed from a conference that brought together theoretical and empirical studies of situations in which ethnic groups differentiate themselves. The editors emphasized the new reality represented by the term ethnicity, reflecting a shift in social identity. They noted, "*We are suggesting that a new word reflects a new reality, and a new usage reflects a change in that reality. The new word is 'ethnicity'"* (Banton, 2015: 103). Thus, the concept of ethnicity encompasses any social group distinguished by specific social, cultural, or economic characteristics, fostering a sense of shared identity or "we-feeling" among its members. In essence, ethnicity is a social group marked by a collective identity rooted in shared social and cultural backgrounds.

2. Marriage, Family, and Change in Marriage Foundations over Time

Throughout history, the structure and function of marriage and family have evolved significantly across time and space. This gradual shift in social structures has been noted by Perini and Sironi (2016: 41-42), who state, *"Family structure across the world has changed in recent decades. In particular, there has been a significant increase in marital disruptions, caused by two main factors: poor relationship quality and a weak commitment to marriage. Several studies have shown marital disruption to be a social phenomenon that can produce various consequences for individual well-being"*. These changes not only affect the well-being of individuals and households but also reflect broader socio-cultural transformations within society.

Killewald (2016) defines marriage as a social institution, emphasizing that rates of marital stability and their determinants can vary across different times and places. In the United States, for example, the latter half of the twentieth century saw significant changes: women's college completion rates caught up to and surpassed those of men, their labor force participation increased dramatically, and the gender earnings gap among full-time workers narrowed (Goldin, 2006). Concurrently, the average time wives spent on unpaid labor declined substantially (Bianchi *et al.*, 2012). Couples began to marry later in life and were more likely to divorce (Fitch and Ruggles, 2000; Stevenson and Wolfers, 2007). Women's earnings became positively correlated with marriage formation (Sweeney, 2002), and gender role attitudes evolved toward greater egalitarianism (Thornton and Young-DeMarco, 2001, cited in Killewald, 2016 : 699).

In addressing marriage and family dynamics, Mo (2016) focuses on family dissolution, including trends in divorce. Mo (2016) notes that *"family dissolution has long been regarded as an important issue both socially and academically. Several theoretical approaches are relevant to establishing causal relationships between various socio-economic and cultural factors and marital disruption. However, despite existing literature on the influence of these determining factors on divorce trends, most studies focus on the Western world, and there is little consensus on the determinants of marital dissolution"*.

Andersson (2016: 51) highlights that increases in the prevalence of divorce and non-traditional family forms have sparked interest in

how attitude orientations relate to these demographic outcomes. Macro-level data reveal that both countries (Surkyn and Lesthaeghe, 2004) and cohorts (Paginini and Rindfiiss, 1993) demonstrate that the presence of non-traditional family behaviors, such as cohabitation and union dissolution, correlates with a growing tolerance for these phenomena. Conversely, individuals adhering to traditional ideals-such as being married with children-exhibit less permissive attitudes toward non-traditional family behaviors than do divorcees or cohabitants (Sieben and Verbakel, 2013). This observation leads researchers to hypothesize that family-related attitudes may significantly influence demographic behavior. In Nepal, the patterns and practices surrounding marriage, sexual relationships, and marital status are also evolving in response to societal changes.

The changing nature of social structures and institutions is frequently examined in relation to capitalism and imperialism. In his book Badalindo Nepali Samaaj (Changing Nepali Society), Mishra (2070 VS) highlights significant social transformations occurring within Nepali society, particularly in the realms of marriage, family, household dynamics, income, education, and health. As Nepal opened its doors to the world, capitalism and imperialism began to infiltrate its economic and political systems, thereby influencing and reshaping local culture to mirror that of imperialist countries. According to Mishra (2010), this imperialist influence has resulted in two critical issues: first, a constriction of the concept of the "local", and second, the imposition of a singular economic framework coupled with a uniform cultural model.

Mishra (2070 VS) further explains that local culture, including household structures, is evolving in response to broader societal changes. As society increasingly incorporates elements of national culture, distinct local characteristics are gradually being erased. This transformation affects various aspects of households, including their size, headship, income, and relationships among members. Changes are also evident in individual attitudes, behaviors, and relationships within households, which are closely tied to social institutions such as marriage and family. Such dynamics resemble planting a new species into an existing root system, altering cultural landscapes across domains, including marriage, family, and social status.

3. Social and Cultural Basis of Marital Status

Perini and Sironi (2016) have examined the issue of gender differences in marital status, specifically focusing on how these

differences manifest in the context of subjective well-being. They argue that understanding the relationship between subjective well-being and marital status necessitates consideration of potential gender disparities. In particular, when exploring the experiences of separated and divorced individuals, it is essential to assess whether the consequences of divorce are similar for men and women (Perini and Sironi, 2016). Research indicates that while both genders experience the effects of divorce, there are notable differences in depression levels associated with this experience. Oldehinkel et al. (2008, cited in Perini and Sironi, 2016) propose that women may be more sensitive to the effects of marital breakdown than men, attributing this sensitivity to greater emotional awareness among women.

However, women's heightened emotional distress may stem not only from gender differences in sensitivity to life events but also from material changes in their economic circumstances. Studies show that while men's incomes often remain relatively stable after separation, women's incomes tend to decline significantly and do not return to pre-separation levels (Perini and Sironi, 2016). In many patriarchal societies, marital relationships are heavily influenced by men's income, which underscores the importance of recognizing that theories surrounding marriage, divorce, and separation are largely shaped by the economic and socio-cultural contexts of individuals.

The context of this study is further elaborated through Konieczny's (2016) analysis, which reveals that congregations that successfully offer outreach programs-characterized by frequent counseling and the presence of post-divorce support-exhibit three distinct cultural elements not found in congregations with infrequent or absent outreach. First, these congregations maintain a realistic yet confident view of marriage as a lifelong commitment, fostering relationships among pastors, counselors, and members that affirm the value of marital permanence and the effectiveness of marriage crisis outreach. Second, they are empowering environments, cultivating local cultures that enable lay members-whether married, divorced, or single-to embrace their efficacy in intimate relationships and service to others. Third, these congregations engage in a cultural transformation of marriage ideals, generating local discourses that both incorporate and challenge the individualized model of marriage prevalent in American society, utilizing religious resources (Konieczny, 2016).

In Nepal, socio-cultural transformation is also underway, necessitating a closer examination of various social institutions, including marriage and family, in the present context. This raises pertinent questions about how the social and cultural backgrounds of individuals in Nepali society shape marriage and its various dimensions, particularly marital status. Moreover, given the diversity of ethnic groups in Nepal-each with its own social and cultural practices-it is essential to explore how ethnicity influences individual attitudes and behaviors. The relationship between ethnicity and marital status in the context of contemporary Nepal remains an underexplored area, warranting further investigation.

4. Objectives, Data Sets and Methods

Nepali society and culture have undergone rapid changes over the past two to three decades, particularly across a generation (25 years). Marriage and family are fundamental units of society, serving as the starting point for social change. This paper explores the transformations occurring within Nepali society and examines how changes in individuals' marital status are associated with their ethnic background or culture, which is also evolving.

To track changes in the living standards of the population of Nepal, the Nepal Living Standard Survey (NLSS) has been conducted periodically, typically every five years. The fourth NLSS, carried out over an 11-year span from 2010/11 to 2022/23, follows the third round of the survey. Each survey includes a question regarding the marital status of every member of the surveyed household.

The NLSS is primarily designed to measure poverty levels within the country. In measuring poverty, it also accounts for other different features of population including ethnic background. This paper explores ethnic background based statuses of individuals. Utilizing survey data sets from three different NLSS rounds-first, third, and fourth-this study explores the relationship between marital status and ethnicity. Bivariate analysis was employed to assess this relationship, with ethnicity and marital status cross-tabulated to generate two-way tables displaying the results.

Given the changes in individuals' ethnic background, corresponding shifts in marital status are anticipated. There has been a gradual change in marital status over the 27-year period from

1995/96 to 2022/23. This paper examines the results on ethnicity and marital status at three specific points in time: 1995/96, 2010/11, and 2022/23, using cross-sectional data. Each time point is discussed separately, followed by a comparison of the changes observed over the 27-year period. In this context, the comparison of cross-sectional data across time provides a longitudinal perspective. Some additional necessary and relevant data on marriage, and marital status have been borrowed from Nepal Demographic and Health Survey (2022) report and data as well.

The application of cross-tabulation and statistical techniques offers descriptive statistics, including two-way tables and non-parametric hypothesis testing using the Chi-Square test. Based on the analysis of these two-way tables and tests of association or independence, conclusions are drawn regarding the relationship between ethnicity and marital status.

5. Theoretical Background: Attitudinal Change and Family Dynamics

Various factors contribute to the nature of marriage and the marital status of individuals. These factors encompass both sociological and psychological elements, often interacting to shape marital dynamics. Andersson (2016) elaborates on this interplay, stating:

> *Building on theoretical and empirical research in social psychology, recent sociological studies have explored the behavioral effects on family attitudes using extensive survey data (see, e.g., Levinger, 1976). One influential framework is Cognitive Dissonance Theory (CDT), which suggests that when behaviors conflict with one's attitudes, it creates cognitive dissonance, leading to psychological discomfort (Festinger, 1957). To alleviate this discomfort, individuals often adjust their attitudes to align with their behaviors. For instance, if someone views marriage as an oppressive institution but still chooses to marry, they may experience psychological distress. In this scenario, adopting more supportive views of marriage-such as becoming critical of separation-can be seen as a defensive reaction to resolve cognitive dissonance. The Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) (Ajzen and Fishbein, 2000: 51-52) offers another framework for analyzing the relationships among behavior, attitudes, and attitude changes, positing that attitudes are specific and evaluative toward particular objects.*

Ultimately, both individual and collective behaviors in any society are shaped socio-psychologically. An individual's attitudes and behaviors are influenced by the social psychology of their environment. Consequently, understanding the foundations of marriage and marital status requires a philosophical exploration of the sociological underpinnings of socio-cultural behavior. To elucidate this philosophical context, we can refer to Andersson's (2016 : 52) insights:

> *Ontologically, a change in attitudes can represent either a superficial adjustment to a behavior or a deeper change of heart regarding that behavior. The TRA assumes that attitude changes signify a re-evaluation of behaviors, while CDT emphasizes the flexibility of attitudes. Although both theories often yield similar empirical predictions, the TRA framework allows for an analysis of how prior experiences inform observed attitude changes. This makes it particularly useful for studies focused on gendered variability in the utility and experiences of family life-course events. Given the complexity of attitude formation, TRA provides a foundational framework for analyzing patterns of attitudinal change and potential gender effects.*

Indeed, the process of attitude formation is intricate, heavily shaped by the socio-cultural context of a society. To fully comprehend this complexity, a micro-level analysis of social structures and systems is essential. Individual identity and perceptions significantly influence the relationships between partners and various aspects of marital status. Davis and Love (2017: 497) clarify this dynamic, stating, *"Research shows that structural hierarchies manifest at the micro level through identity processes. In particular, those occupying higher positions of status and power are better able to define situations and verify identity meanings in relation to their less powerful and lower status counterparts"* (Burke, Stets, and Cerven, 2007; Cast, 2003; Cast, Stets, and Burke, 1999; Stets and Harrod, 2004).

From an identity theory perspective (Burke and Stets, 2009), we can examine how social position influences identity changes. This examination involves assessing the effects of status on identity stability within individual interactions. Persistent identity instability serves as a critical mechanism of identity change (Burke, 2006). Thus, the findings from this study have implications for understanding how social structures affect enduring identity processes and pave the

way for longitudinal investigations into the subject. This topic is of significant sociological relevance, particularly regarding the various contexts in which status differences shape interpersonal interactions, such as within families, workplaces, educational settings, and everyday encounters among individuals of diverse races, genders, and social class positions (Davis and Love, 2017: 497).

Green, Valleriani, and Adam (2016) have conducted a sociological analysis of the social dimensions of marriage and family, with a particular focus on social norms. In the sociological literature on marriage and family, there has long been an emphasis on the weakening of the social norms that traditionally guide marriage (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, 2002; Cherlin, 2004; Giddens, 1992; Gross, 2005; Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001, cited in Green, Valleriani, and Adam, 2016, pp. 417-418). These social norms play a significant role in shaping individuals' decisions regarding marriage and marital status. In this context, Green, Valleriani, and Adam (2016 : 417-418) further elaborate:

> *In one of the most significant and widely cited works on changing relationship forms in the modern West, The Transformation of Intimacy (1992), Anthony Giddens emphasizes the late modern focus on equality between partners, as well as their mutual sexual and emotional satisfaction. He argues that the "pure relationship" has emerged in response to the historical decline of relationships primarily formed for procreation and economic stability. This new relationship model is based solely on the satisfaction of each partner's needs, existing only as long as it provides sufficient benefits for both individuals.*

Thus, the pure relationship marks a shift away from marriages defined by law, tradition, and necessity, moving toward a more flexible dyadic form determined by the needs and interests of each partner. This transformation may reflect a broader historical trend toward individualization, where individuals-rather than the state or traditional structures of race and class-create their own goals and life arrangements as a reflexive achievement of the self (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, cited in Green, Valleriani, and Adam, 2016: 417-418). Across all societies, marriage and marital practices are often influenced by law, tradition, and evolving social norms and values. To fully understand the various dimensions of marriage, it is crucial to examine the different factors that contribute to changes in marital status.

Killewald (2016: 697) discusses how individuals engage with marriage and marital status, highlighting the significant transformations that occurred during the latter half of the twentieth century. Changes in women's employment, education, household labor time, marriage timing, divorce rates, and gender role attitudes (Bianchi *et al.*, 2012; Fitch and Ruggles, 2000; Goldin, 2006; Stevenson and Wolfers, 2007; Thornton and Young-DeMarco, 2001) have substantially altered the circumstances that either strengthen or weaken marriages (Killewald, 2016: 697). In this context, Killewald hypothesizes that the effects of financial characteristics-such as economic independence and financial strain-on divorce risk are likely to remain stable over time (p. 697). This perspective underscores the importance of economic factors as a critical determinant of marital dynamics, particularly regarding divorce risk. A strong economic position enables individuals to work independently without significant obstacles.

Killewald (2016) further posits that the gendered expectations of spouses have evolved across marital cohorts. Behaviors once viewed as deviant in earlier cohorts may become normalized in later ones. Specifically, she predicts that the norm of wives as homemakers has diminished in importance for marital stability, whereas the husband as breadwinner norm continues to be strong. Evaluating changes in the determinants of marital stability across different marriage cohorts acknowledges that marriage and its associated expectations are deeply embedded in broader, evolving gender structures (Risman, 2011: 697).

While Killewald (2016) focuses on the causes of divorce in relation to individuals' marital status, it is essential to recognize that numerous factors may contribute to divorce. However, Killewald emphasizes the role of financial considerations, stating:

Despite substantial research, empirical evidence linking money and work to divorce has been characterized as "inconclusive" (Sayer and Bianchi, 2000 : 910), "contradictory" (Dechter, 1992: 1), "mixed" (Brines and Joyner, 1999 : 338; Oppenheimer, 1997 : 442; South, 2001 : 226), and "inconsistent" (Ono, 1998 ; 675; Sayer *et al.*, 2011: 1990), with conclusions often deemed "elusive" (Rogers, 2004: 59). Consequently, identifying and understanding the true causes of divorce within any social context can be challenging. Nevertheless, researchers continue to explore the underlying reasons for divorce among individuals.

6. Analytical Framework of Marriage and Marital Status

Marriage is intended to establish a lifelong union between men and women. While most marriages do endure, some may end in divorce or separation, an outcome that is generally unexpected. Patterns of divorce and separation, however, vary across different times and places. Divorce conceptually occurs when at least one partner believes that they would be better off apart than remaining married. The likelihood of divorce is influenced by the perceived benefits of marriage (Becker, Landes, and Michael, 1977). Killewald (2016: 697) elaborates on the theoretical foundation of marriage partnerships and their related aspects as follows:

> *The economic independence perspective posits that divorce rates rise when partners are less financially dependent on each other, which allows spouses to leave unhappy marriages (Ruggles, 1997; Sayer et al., 2011; Schoen et al., 2002). Wives are often more economically reliant on their husbands if they have less work experience. However, economic independence is also contingent upon other factors influencing women's earning potential, such as education, occupation, child support policies, and government assistance for low-income families.*

Evidence supporting the economic independence perspective among couples in the United States is mixed. While some researchers find support for this perspective (Dechter, 1992; Heckert, Nowak, and Snyder, 1998; Ruggles, 1997; Sayer *et al.*, 2011; Schoen *et al.*, 2002; South, 2001; Teachman, 2010), others do not (Rogers and DeBoer, 2001; Sayer and Bianchi, 2000). Furthermore, although it has received less attention, this perspective suggests that men's divorce decisions are also influenced by their anticipated economic stability post-divorce (noted in Sayer *et al.*, 2011 : 1987, cited in Killewald, 2016: 697).

Roth and Dashper (2016: NP7-NP8) discuss marriage practices and marital status in relation to gender, emphasizing women's experiences from a feminist perspective. They reference Ramazanoglu (1989), who critiques the notion of a singular "feminist standpoint", acknowledging the diverse experiences of women influenced by race, class, marital and parental status, age, and sexuality. This recognition highlights the significance of intersectionality in feminist discourse. Ramazanoglu (1989: 440) concludes that understanding how experiences are shaped by material conditions enhances the production of scientific knowledge, asserting that *"feminism can improve on male-centered sociology"*.

The fundamental features of individuals, including attitudes and behaviors, are socially constructed through the lens of gender. As noted by Roth and Dashper (2016), women's experiences with marriage and marital status are significantly influenced by gender, which is a critical social structure. Consequently, discussions surrounding individual attitudes and behaviors must be contextualized within the social and cultural backgrounds of individuals, including ethnic and gender identities.

7. Patterns of Marital Practices in Nepal

In Nepal, Nakarmi (2021) discusses the Newari community, where socio-economic background significantly affects cultural practices and resource access. Due to occupational and cultural differences, Newari caste groups experience unequal access to education, employment, and other resources, often stratified by gender. This socioeconomic stratification influences marriage practices across class and ethnicity in Nepal, as argued by Pandey (2010) and Gautam (2017). Access to education, employment, and healthcare is largely determined by economic class, with wealthier groups enjoying greater access to these resources. This disparity, in turn, influences social and cultural norms around marriage-such as the age at marriage, likelihood of divorce, and separation rates. However, social and cultural practices also shape marriage and marital status in their own distinct ways.

Age is a key factor influencing marriage practices worldwide, including in Nepal. As children reach adolescence, discussions about marriage often begin within their families. According to the Nepal Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS) 2022, the "age at first marriage" is defined as the age when an individual begins living with their first spouse or partner. Marital patterns are diverse and influenced by factors such as ethnicity.

NDHS (2022: 95) reports a significant decline in adolescent marriage rates. The proportion of women aged 15-19 who are currently married has dropped from 43% in 1996 to 27% in 2016, and further to 21% in 2022, indicating a shift toward delayed marriage for young women. Similarly, the percentage of women aged 20-24 who are married has decreased from 84% in 1996 to 75% in 2016, reaching 68% in 2022.

Education is also a critical factor in marriage timing. Among women aged 25-49, those with secondary education marry, on

average, 3.6 years later than those with no education (20.5 years versus 16.9 years). Men with a secondary education marry approximately four years later than those without any education (23.8 years versus 19.8 years). The median age at first marriage varies by ethnic background as well (Table-1).

Table-1: Median Age at First Marriage by Ethic Group

Ethnic group	Women age		Men age
	20-49	25-49	25-49
Brahmin/Chhetri	19.4	19.1	23.4
Dalit	17.2	17.0	20.1
Janajati	19.5	19.2	22.9
Madhesi	17.2	16.9	21.8
Muslim	16.8	16.5	20.4

Source: MOHP (2023), NDHS (2022)

The NDHS (2022: 95) highlights significant variation in the median age at first marriage among women aged 25-49 across ethnic groups and regions in Nepal. Women from the Muslim ethnic group have the lowest median age at first marriage (16.5 years), while Janajati women have the highest (19.2 years). Regionally, women in Madhesh Province marry at a median age of 16.6 years, compared to 19.9 years in Bagmati Province. For men, the median age at first marriage is lowest in Karnali Province (20.3 years) and highest in Bagmati Province (23.8 years) (NDHS, 2022: 95-96).

Similar trends appear in the age of first sexual intercourse. According to NDHS (2022 : 96), the median age at first sexual intercourse for women aged 25-49 is 18.3 years, compared to 20.7 years for men, suggesting that women engage in sexual intercourse 2.4 years earlier on average, largely due to earlier marriage. Nine percent of women had their first sexual intercourse by age 15, compared to only 2% of men. By age 18, 47% of women and 21% of men had engaged in sexual intercourse, and by age 25, 91% of women and 78% of men had done so (NDHS, 2022: 96).

Interestingly, among men, the median age at first sexual intercourse (20.7 years) occurs 1.6 years earlier than the median age at first marriage (22.3 years), indicating that men are more likely to engage in sexual activity before marriage. In contrast, for women, the median ages for first marriage and first sexual intercourse are the same (18.3 years), suggesting that marriage and sexual initiation often coincide for women (NDHS, 2022: 96).

While marriage and sexual initiation are often correlated, recent patterns in Nepal show considerable diversity. The NDHS monitors these trends, documenting variations across demographic groups, including ethnicity. Table-2 illustrates the median age at first sexual intercourse across ethnic groups.

According to NDHS (2022: 96-97), the median age at first sexual intercourse for women is highest among Brahman/Chhetri (19.1 years) and Janajati (19.2 years) groups, while it is lowest among Madheshi women (17 years), followed closely by Dalit women (17.1 years). For men, the Brahman/Chhetri group also has the highest median age (21.9 years), followed by Madheshi men (20.7 years). The lowest median ages are found among Dalit men (19.3 years) and Janajati men (20.5 years). These findings reveal substantial differences in the age of first sexual intercourse across Nepal's ethnic groups.

Table-2: Median Age at First Sexual Intercourse by Ethnic Group

Ethnic group	Women age		Men age
	20-49	25-49	25-49
Brahmin/Chhetri	19.3	19.1	21.9
Dalit	17.3	17.1	19.3
Janajati	19.4	19.2	20.5
Madhesi	17.2	17.0	20.7
Muslim	16.9	16.5	20.1

Source: MOHP (2023), NDHS (2022)

According to the Nepal DHS (2022), 48% of women and 54% of men aged 15-49 reported having had sexual intercourse in the four weeks prior to the survey. Additionally, 21% of women and 25% of men in this age range reported never having had sexual intercourse. Trends show that the proportion of women reporting recent sexual activity has remained steady since the previous survey, while the proportion of men reporting sexual activity in the past four weeks has declined from 61% in 2016 to 54% in 2022 (NDHS, 2022).

The NDHS (2022: 96-97) report also reveals patterns of sexual activity based on various background characteristics. For instance, only 6% of men aged 15-19 were sexually active in the past four weeks, compared with 13% of women in the same age group. Among men who have never married, 31% reported having had sexual intercourse at some point, with only 5% reporting recent sexual

activity in the past four weeks. In contrast, only 3% of never-married women reported ever having had sexual intercourse.

Marital duration also influences sexual activity. Thirty-seven percent of currently married women did not engage in sexual intercourse in the four weeks prior to the survey. Women married for 1-4 years (58%) and those married for 5-9 years (59%) were less likely to have been sexually active in the preceding four weeks compared to those married for under a year (68%) or for over ten years (65% or more) (NDHS, 2022: 96).

These findings indicate that various aspects of marriage and marital status are associated with background characteristics, such as age, education, gender, and ethnicity. However, in this paper, only marital status in relation to ethnic background is discussed.

8. Ethnicity, Marital Status and Changes in Nepal

As in Nepal and other countries around the world, marriage was a central focus in debates over women's rights in nineteenth-century Britain (Richardson, 2016). Discussions on marriage vary widely across cultures; however, recent discourse has increasingly focused on gender. Richardson (2016: 177) notes, "*The gendered and classed notions of equality limited extensions of the political franchise to middle-class men, restricted women's rights within marriage, and denied them access to higher education*". Women's participation in professions was also severely limited and scrutinized, which shaped views on marriage and the roles of men and women within it. Influential critics, including John Ruskin and John Stuart Mill, challenged these limitations, reshaping expectations among educated and professional elites (Richardson, 2016).

The marital status of the population aged ten years and above was reported in the 2021 census (NSO, 2023). According to this data, 33.1 percent of the population in this age group has never been married. Breaking this down by sex, 38.2 percent of males and 28.4 percent of females aged ten years or older are unmarried. Additionally, 61.8 percent of the population in this age group is married, while 4.5 percent are widowed. Among males, 59.1 percent are married, compared to 64.3 percent of females in the same age group (NSO, 2023).

The 2021 population census (NSO, 2023) also provides data on age at first marriage. It indicates that 34.4 percent of the ever-married population aged ten years and above married for the first time

between the ages of 18 and 20 (with 32.6 percent of males and 35.9 percent of females). Additionally, 22.3 percent were first married between ages 15 and 17 (12.3 percent of males and 30.4 percent of females), while 7 percent were first married at ages 10-14 (3.0 percent of males and 10.2 percent of females). A small percentage (0.3 percent) were married for the first time before reaching the age of ten. Overall, the median age at first marriage is 19 years, with a median of 21 years for males and 18 years for females (NSO, 2023).

Marriage, however, is influenced by a complex interplay of factors, including gender, ethnicity, and education. Today, ethnicity plays an increasingly prominent role in discussions about individual attitudes and behaviors. In Nepal, marriage and marital status are evolving in response to global influences, such as international migration. Nevertheless, ethnic background remains a significant factor in shaping individual attitudes, given that each ethnic group possesses its own distinct culture and traditions. These cultural variations among ethnic groups influence marriage and marital status, as shown in Table-3.

Table-3: Ethnicity and Marital Status in Nepal (N=14734)

Ethnicity	Marital Status (In percentage)					Total
	Married	Divorced	Separated	Widow/ Widower	Never Married	
Hill Caste	55.9	0.4	0.6	5.6	37.5	100.0
Madhesh/ Tarai Caste	70.6	0.0	0.2	6.0	23.2	100.0
Mountain/Hill Janajati	54.4	0.1	0.6	5.6	39.3	100.0
Madhesh/ Tarai Janajati	63.9	0.7	0.3	3.9	31.2	100.0
Hill Dalit	58.8	0.0	0.6	4.7	35.9	100.0
Religious/ Linguistic Group	69.0	0.2	0.1	6.3	24.5	100.0
Others	64.2	0.2	0.2	6.1	29.2	100.0
Total	59.8	0.3	0.4	5.6	33.9	100.0

Source: Computed by the researcher based on NLSS-I: 1995/96 data sets; Note: The results obtained and presented in the table are weighted by individual weights.

The practices of divorce, separation, and other aspects of marital status vary significantly based on the cultural backgrounds of individuals associated with specific ethnic groups (Table-3). In Nepal's first Living Standards Survey (NLSS) of 1995/96, data on divorce and separation practices were collected. According to this survey, the divorce rate was highest among the Madhesh/Tarai Janajati (0.7%), followed by the Hill Caste group (0.4%). The separation rate was highest among Hill/Mountain Janajati (0.6%), Hill Caste (0.6%), and Hill Dalit (0.6%). Notably, no cases of divorce were recorded among the Madhesh/Tarai Caste and Hill Dalit groups in 1995/96. Divorce rates were lower among the religious/ linguistic group (0.2%) and Hill/Mountain Janajati (0.1%), while separation rates were also low among the Madhesh/Tarai Caste group (0.2%) and the religious group (0.1%). These findings suggest that marital practices, including divorce and separation, differ by ethnic background and may be associated with cultural influences.

A Chi-Square test of independence revealed a significant result ($^2 = 157.619$, $p < 0.01$), providing sufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis of no association between ethnicity and marital status. This supports the research hypothesis that ethnicity and marital status are indeed associated. These findings suggest that the diverse cultural backgrounds of ethnic groups influence marital practices, shaping aspects of marriage and marital status in Nepal.

The 2022 Nepal Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS) reports that polygyny-the practice of having multiple wives-persists in Nepal, though it has declined over time. In the survey, women who report that their husband or partner has other wives are considered to be in a polygynous marriage. Among currently married women aged 15-49, 2% reported having co-wives, while 1% of men indicated they had more than one wife. Trends show a decrease in polygyny: the percentage of married women aged 15-49 with co-wives dropped from 6% in 1996 to 4% in 2016, reaching 2% in 2022 (NDHS, 2022).

Patterns of polygyny vary by age, ethnicity, and cultural background. According to the NDHS (2022), polygyny is more prevalent among older age groups; 4% of women aged 40-44 report co-wives, compared to less than 1% of women aged 15-19. Men aged 40-44 are also more likely to have multiple wives (3%). Among ethnic groups, Brahmin/Chhetri women report the highest rate of polygyny (3%), while Madhesi women report the lowest (1%) (NDHS, 2022).

Table-4: Ethnicity and Marital Status in Nepal (N=22360)

Ethnicity	Marital Status (In percentage)							Total
	Never married	Single married	Poly married	Re-married	Widow/ widower	Divorced	Separated	
Hill Caste	36.4	53.4	1.0	3.3	5.2	0.2	0.5	100.0
Madhesh/ Tarai Caste	29.8	62.5	0.3	2.8	4.6	0.0	0.1	100.0
Hill/ Mountain Janajati	37.8	50.9	1.0	4.1	5.1	0.4	0.6	100.0
Tarai Janajati	37.4	55.5	0.7	2.0	4.3	0.0	0.1	100.0
Hill Dalit	38.2	49.4	1.0	5.8	4.9	0.2	0.4	100.0
Madhesh/ Tarai Dalit	29.6	60.7	0.3	2.7	6.0	0.3	0.3	100.0
Religious/Linguistic Group	37.7	54.7	1.4	1.4	4.2	0.1	0.4	100.0
Others	31.8	59.7	0.0	1.4	7.2	0.0	0.0	100.0
Total	35.6	54.5	0.8	3.4	5.0	0.2	0.4	100.0
Pearson Chi-Square=187.600 (1628981.817), df= 42, *p*=0.000 (Sig. 2-sided), =0.01								

Source: NLSS-II: 2010/11 (Computed by the researcher);
Note: The results obtained and presented in the table are weighted by individual weights..

Provincial differences are also evident: the percentage of women with co-wives is highest in Sudurpashchim Province (5%) and lowest in Madhesh Province (1%). Education level influences polygyny rates as well. Among women, 3% of those with no education have co-wives, compared to only 1% of women with more than a secondary education. For men, those with no or basic education are more likely to have multiple wives (1% and 2%, respectively), while men with higher education show nearly no polygynous practices (0%) (NDHS, 2022).

Overall, marriage practices in Nepal appear to be shaped by cultural, ethnic, and educational factors. Table-5 shows the marital status of individuals across ethnic groups of Nepal. The results in the this table indicate that the divorce rate is higher among the Hill/Mountain Janajati group (0.4%) compared to other ethnic groups in Nepal. This rate is twice that of the Hill Caste group (0.2%)

and four times higher than that of the religious/ linguistic groups (0.1%). The divorce rate for Hill/Mountain Janajati is comparable to that of the Tarai Janajati and Hill Dalit groups, both at 0.3%. Interestingly, there is no recorded divorce rate among the Madhesh/ Tarai Caste and Madhesh/Tarai Dalit groups.

Table-5: Ethnicity and Marital Status in Nepal (N=38951)

Ethnicity	Marital Status (In percentage)					Total
	Never Married	Married	Widow/ Widower	Divorced	Separated	
Hill Caste	33.4	60.3	5.1	0.2	0.9	100.0
Madhesh/ Tarai Caste	34.0	61.1	4.5	0.0	0.3	100.0
Hill/Mountain Janajati	34.0	59.6	4.9	0.4	1.0	100.0
Tarai Janajati	31.1	62.5	5.4	0.3	0.6	100.0
Hill Dalit	34.1	59.4	4.3	0.3	1.9	100.0
Madhesh/ Tarai Dalit	33.0	60.7	5.9	0.0	0.5	100.0
Religious/ Linguistic Group	38.9	56.4	4.2	0.1	0.4	100.0
Others	36.6	63.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	100.0
Total	33.7	60.3	4.9	0.2	0.9	100.0
Pearson Chi-Square= 102.617 (589416.276), df= 28, p=0.000 (Sig. 2-sided), =0.01						

Source: NLSS-IV: 2022/23 (Computed by the researcher); Note: The results obtained and presented in the table are weighted by individual weights.

Separation practices also vary significantly across ethnic groups (see Table-5). The separation rate is highest among Hill Dalits (1.9%), surpassing all other groups, including Madhesh/Tarai Dalits (0.5%). The rate of living separately is also relatively high among Hill/Mountain Janajati (1.0%) and Hill Caste individuals (0.9%), which is second only to Hill Dalits. In contrast, the rate of separation is lowest among the Madhesh/Tarai Caste group (0.3%), followed by the religious/linguistic group (0.4%).

These findings suggest that marital practices, including divorce and separation, vary by ethnic group, indicating a possible association with the ethnic and cultural backgrounds of individuals.

The Chi-Square test yielded a significant result (^{2} = 102.617, $p <$ 0.01), providing sufficient evidence to support the hypothesis that

there is an association between ethnicity and marital practices in Nepal. This evidence suggests that marital practices among individuals differ according to their ethnic backgrounds.

The percentage of married individuals in each survey remains around 60%. Among the married, the rates of divorce and separation show slight variation over time. The divorce rate decreased from 0.3% in 1995/96 to 0.2% in 2010/11. Meanwhile, the separation rate held steady at 0.4% in both 1995/96 and 2010/11. Notably, the separation rate rose significantly to 0.9% in 2022/23-more than double the 0.4% rate in 2010/11. By contrast, the divorce rate remained at 0.2% in 2022/23, consistent with 2010/11.

Despite these percentages, court records and local practices indicate a general increase in divorce cases. Marital status trends-including increases, stability, and declines-vary across different ethnic groups in Nepal, reflecting a complex pattern of change over time.

9. Discussion

Mo (2016) presents compelling arguments, noting that while prior theories of divorce may have had limited scopes, they established a theoretical foundation upon which subsequent empirical studies were built. These studies highlighted significant factors influencing divorce rates from an empirical perspective. Mo (2016) identifies key variables for future studies on divorce at both the macro and individual levels. At the macro level, these include national income (GDP per capita), unemployment rates, women's educational attainment, and general fertility rates. At the individual level, important variables include personal income, educational level by race and gender, women's working hours and income, and the number of children.

In the context of this research, findings indicate that marital status varies significantly across ethnic groups, with a proven association between ethnicity and marital status across all three rounds of the NLSS survey. Percent distribution of women and men age 15-49 by current marital status, by age, given in Nepal DHS (2022) report as Never married (36%) Married or living together (63.1%), Divorced (0.2%), Separated (0.3%) and Widowed (0.3%) which is similar to NLSS results. This aligns closely with Mo's (2016) argument that an individual's socioeconomic background is a critical factor in divorce outcomes. The Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS, now NSO, 2023)

reported a divorce rate of 1.2 per 1,000 married couples in Nepal for 2019. This means that, on average, only one couple per 1,000 married couples divorced, indicating a relatively low divorce rate compared to other countries.

Additionally, previous studies suggest that research on the influence of socioeconomic factors on divorce has primarily focused on Western countries, with limited research on divorce theories and trends in non-Western contexts-especially in some Asian countries, due to data limitations (Mo, 2016). Mo raises thought-provoking questions about whether divorce theories from Western countries are applicable in Asian contexts or whether Asian countries might follow unique family theories shaped by their distinct cultural values. Furthermore, Mo questions whether Asian countries will exhibit similar divorce trends as Western nations during periods of rapid economic transformation.

10. Conclusions

Over the last two to three decades, Nepali society has undergone rapid changes in various areas, particularly in marriage and family structures. Traditional marriage practices are increasingly giving way to modern approaches, especially in the rise of love marriages and inter-caste unions. Despite these shifts, the overall pattern of marriage remains largely similar, though slight generational changes are emerging in divorce and separation trends. These changes in marital status vary across Nepal's diverse ethnic groups.

Findings from three surveys show that the divorce rate is higher among the Hill/Mountain Janajati group compared to other ethnic groups in Nepal. This rate is twice as high as that of the Hill Caste group and also exceeds the rate observed in religious/linguistic groups. Divorce rates for the Hill/Mountain Janajati group are comparable to those of the Tarai Janajati and Hill Dalit groups. Notably, there is no recorded divorce rate among the Madhesh/Tarai Caste and Madhesh/Tarai Dalit groups.

Separation rates also vary considerably across ethnic lines. Hill Dalits exhibit the highest separation rate, surpassing all other groups, including Madhesh/Tarai Dalits. The rate of individuals living separately is also relatively high among Hill/Mountain Janajati and Hill Caste groups, second only to Hill Dalits. In contrast, the Madhesh/Tarai Caste group has the lowest separation rate, followed by the religious/linguistic groups.

These findings suggest that marital practices, including divorce and separation, vary significantly across ethnic groups, indicating a potential link between marital patterns and the ethnic or cultural backgrounds of individuals.

Chi-Square test yielded significant results, providing strong evidence to support the hypothesis that there is an association between ethnicity and marital practices in Nepal. This suggests that marital behaviors among individuals are influenced by their ethnic backgrounds.

This research explores the relationship between cultural background-specifically ethnicity-and marital status, revealing notable variations in marital status across different ethnic groups. This suggests a significant association between ethnicity and marital status, as supported by various sociological and socio-psychological theories articulated by scholars such as Andersson (2016), Davis and Love (2017), Green, Valleriani, and Adam (2016), Killewald (2016), Roth and Dashper (2016), and Mishra (2010), among others, in the context of Giddens and other sociologists.

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