

POLICY BRIEF:

SOUTH ASIA

DIGITAL ECOSYSTEM ANALYSIS
ON CHILD MARRIAGE
IN BANGLADESH, INDIA
AND NEPAL



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INTRODUCTION

The South Asian region has made great strides in reducing instances of child marriage – where a girl's risk of marrying in childhood has dropped by more than a third, from nearly 50 per cent to 30 per cent. However, there is more to be done to eradicate the harmful practice.¹

Instances of child marriages² across Bangladesh, India and Nepal are rooted in gender inequality and sustained by cultural and social norms, poverty and lack of opportunities. Further, natural disasters and social and political conflicts also contribute to high rates of child marriage.³ Humanitarian crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic have amplified the issue. It has led to increased sexual violence, the breakdown in the rule of law, disruption of social structures and internal and international displacement, all of which have led to child marriages in different contexts.⁴



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Governments, civil society organizations (CSOs) and non-profit organizations across all three countries have been working proactively to curb the issue of child marriage. The primary focus has been on empowering adolescent children through skill development and dialogue, enhancing the quality of and accessibility to education, health care and protection, fostering an enabling legal and policy framework, offering economic support to disadvantaged children and their families, and mobilizing parents and community members.⁵ Additionally, the South Asia Initiative to End Violence Against Children (SAIEVAC) was adopted by all three countries as a plan of action to end child marriages across the region.⁶ Finally, UNFPA and UNICEF have collaborated on a multi-country programme to end child marriage by involving families, educators, health providers, governments and religious and traditional leaders as part of the global effort to end child marriage by 2030.⁷

In the past few years, the South Asian region has seen a sustained increase in information and communications technology (ICT) infrastructure and access to digital technologies and their usage.⁸ In 2021, Internet penetration in India, Nepal and Bangladesh stood at 45 per cent,⁹ 36.7 per cent¹⁰ and 29 per cent,¹¹ respectively. Therefore, mobile Internet can potentially serve as a reliable tool to raise awareness and compel individuals and organizations across different strata of society to take action against child marriage. Community outreach activities in these countries can be adapted to digital channels – practitioners in this area leverage social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram to facilitate communication.¹²

Recently, socially relevant issues have gained traction on social media platforms, including child marriage. Therefore, it becomes imperative to tap into the online space to understand perceptions existing within the community. This understanding can drive culturally informed initiatives by governments, non-profit organizations and individuals. Quilt.AI, in partnership with the UNFPA Asia Pacific Regional Office, combines digital research and artificial intelligence to build an effective communication and advocacy strategy against harmful practices such as child marriage and Gender-Biased Sex Selection (GBSS) in Asia. This report examines online narratives related to child marriage in Bangladesh, India and Nepal.

¹ <https://www.unicef.org/rosa/what-we-do/child-protection/child-marriage>

² Child marriage here refers to any formal marriage or informal union between a child under the age of 18 and an adult or another child (as defined by UNICEF).

³ https://asiapacific.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/201008_cmhs-final.pdf

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ <https://www.unicef.org/media/88796/file/Child-marriage-Bangladesh-profile-2019.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/articles/child-marriage-south-asia-regional-plan/>

⁷ <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/unicef-and-unfpa-renew-multi-country-initiative-protect-millions-girls-child>

⁸ https://www.itu.int/dms_pub/itu-d/opb/ind/D-IND-DIG_TRENDS_ASP.01-2021-PDF-E.pdf

⁹ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/792074/india-internet-penetration-rate/>

¹⁰ <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2021-nepal>

¹¹ <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2021-bangladesh>

¹² <https://www.plankorea.or.kr/files/lo/ac/1623031914ciA1p0Ja.pdf>

METHODOLOGY

Big data from online searches and public posts were analysed for Bangladesh, India and Nepal to identify potential trends related to child marriage. The reference period for search data ranged from April 2021 to March 2022, whereas for social media posts it ran from January 2018 to April 2022.

Across the three countries, 127 keywords and approximately 415,280 unique searches were analysed. Keywords were determined by consulting the language used in local and English-medium media and reports by non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Therefore, the keyword list included English and local words in Hindi, Nepali and Bengali. This was followed by a brief literature review on the prevalence of child marriage in the countries. The keyword list was later used as a search analysis tool to determine which keywords produce online volume. The final keyword list reflects how individuals search for these terms in the countries, including local words and phrases. Historical search data for each keyword was extracted for month-to-month data comparison.

The keywords were further clustered into four categories: information-seeking, law-related, religion-related and help-seeking, and an aggregate of the four. The categories are defined as:



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● INFORMATION-SEEKING:

general searches about child marriage or early marriage
(e.g. "percentage of child marriage in India", "what are disadvantages of early marriage", "child marriage in Bangladesh")

● LAW-RELATED:

searches related to legal aspects of child marriage
(e.g. "child marriage act", "legal age to get married")

● RELIGION-RELATED:

searches about religion and child marriage
(e.g. "minimum age for marriage in Islam")

● HELP-SEEKING:

searches about needing solutions to end child marriage or stopping the practice
(e.g. "report on child marriage", "what to do for early marriage")

The social media discourse analysis included a qualitative read of 1,000 posts across Twitter, Facebook and YouTube (including comments) to understand better what people are discussing on child marriage across social media platforms.

Limitations

- For search, only data from the past year can be extracted. Further, who is searching for the keywords cannot be determined.
- Social media data depends on what the research team can receive from each platform. It is not under the research team's control when social media platforms change their data-sharing policies with third-party organizations.

For example, at the end of July 2021, Facebook no longer gave access to its audience insights information. This leads to limited analysis of age and geography disaggregated data for this study.

- Religion-related keywords were not studied in Nepal due to the low or no volume of searches for them.



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FINDINGS: SEARCH ANALYSIS

Information-seeking searches had the highest volume across all three countries

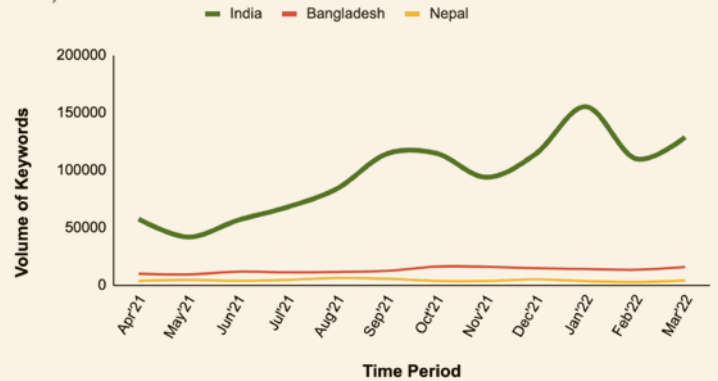
Across all three countries, information-seeking searches had the highest volume during the time studied. The breakdowns per country are:

- **India:** 1,139,060
- **Bangladesh:** 156,500
- **Nepal:** 50,940

However, India had the highest volume of searches for information-seeking keywords among the three countries, while Nepal had the least search volume for the same.

This could be due to population differences, Internet access and usage, and general interest in knowing more about child marriage.

Information-seeking searches in India, Bangladesh, and Nepal (April 2021 to March 2022)



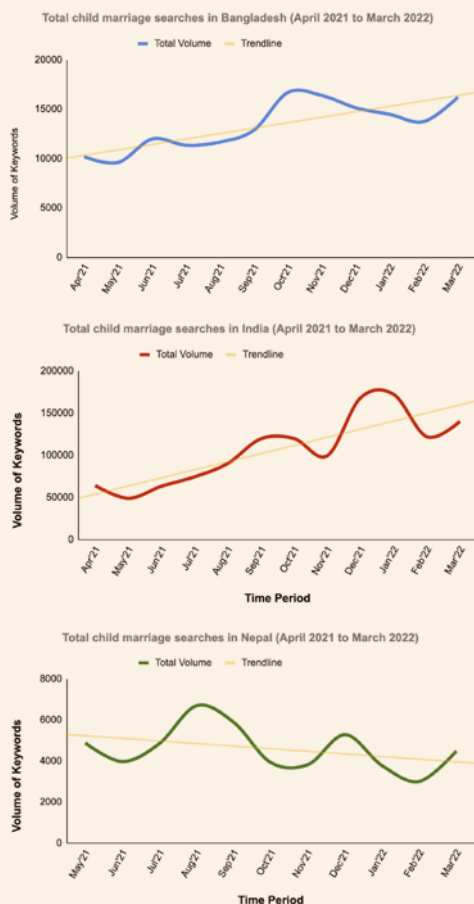
India and Bangladesh witnessed a steady increase in child marriage searches, with the trend being different in Nepal

In India and Bangladesh, a general upward trend was observed in total child marriage-related searches from April 2021 to March 2022.

In Nepal, an upward trend was observed during the first period, with a 27 per cent jump from July 2021 to August 2021, and then a general decline over the next few months (as depicted by the trendline).

Search spikes peaked during specific periods as a possible response to significant events. For Nepal, the increase observed corresponds to awareness initiatives by stakeholders such as Action Aid Nepal.¹³

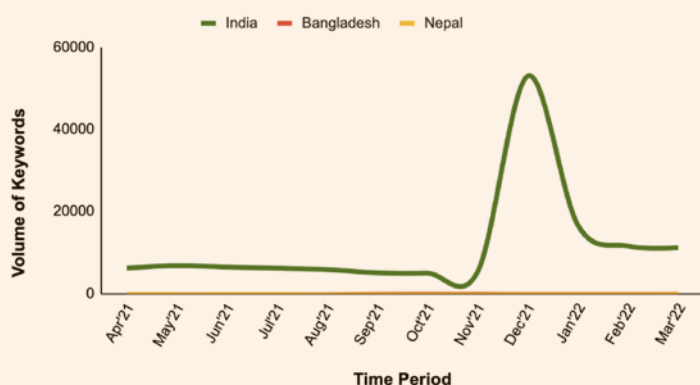
In India, there was a 69 per cent increase between November and December 2021. This coincides with the Government of India proposition to increase the legal age of marriage for women from 18 to 21 years.¹⁴



¹³ <https://nepal.actionaid.org/stories/2021/youth-led-campaign-against-child-marriage>

¹⁴ <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/union-cabinet-gives-nod-to-raise-womens-marriage-age-to-21/article37968276.ece>

Law-related searches in India, Bangladesh, and Nepal (April 2021 to March 2022)



Law-related searches were highest in India compared with Bangladesh and Nepal

India had a significant volume of law-related searches among the three countries, with a phenomenal 889 per cent jump between November 2021 and December 2021. The spike may be directly related to the proposition of changing the legal age of marriage for women.¹⁵ On the other hand, Bangladesh and Nepal had far fewer searches for law-related keywords – possibly due to the lack of events of legal importance during the study period.

FINDINGS: SOCIAL MEDIA ANALYSIS



Twitter was used across countries to denounce the practice of child marriage and generally speak about the issue

A similar discourse criticizing the harmful practice of child marriage was observed on Twitter across all three countries. International organizations and CSOs utilized it to promote messages and events for awareness-building and advocacy. Most of the discourse was in English for India and Bangladesh. In Nepal, child marriage tweets were shared by local media and reshared by the public. While the overall theme was similar on Twitter, the behaviour patterns and discussions varied across countries based on their cultural and religious contexts.

However, it is important to understand that the discourse that denounces child marriage may fail to recognize the evolving capacity of adolescents to forge relationships and express their sexuality. As a limitation, this research does not explore what the orientation of the discourse is regarding adolescent sexuality and agency.



Facebook was used as a mobilization platform to prevent child marriage across countries

A pattern of forming communities, public pages and groups to spread awareness and provide last-mile support to survivors and bystanders of child marriages on Facebook was observed across countries. NGOs and CSOs leverage Facebook pages and communities to conduct awareness campaigns and advocacy efforts across countries. These efforts appear to be more district- or state-specific in India than in Nepal and Bangladesh, where nationwide outreach approaches are followed. Support led by government institutions was also observed to be more prominent in India than in Bangladesh and Nepal.



¹⁵ Ibid.

YouTube was leveraged to create awareness against child marriage across countries

In all the countries, videos on YouTube were created and shared by NGOs and aimed to raise awareness about child marriage. The discourse under YouTube comments varied in each country. For example, in Nepal, there was a higher engagement in a video about the laws around the age to marry. People shared personal anecdotes and asked if they could marry their boyfriend or girlfriend as teenagers.

In Bangladesh, the video with the highest viewership displayed a documentary on implementing the law against child marriage in Bangladesh. The comments section of these YouTube videos was dominated by comments supporting the law and criticizing the practice of child marriage in Bangladesh.

However, a few comments also questioned the law under the pretext of religious practices and laws. In India, people used the comments feature to express their views on the practice and indicate a need to end it. They used hashtags such as #endchildmarriage to define their support further. Others expressed shame and shock at the state of affairs in the country. About 20 per cent called out the Government for its laxity in controlling child marriage cases and implementing stronger laws.



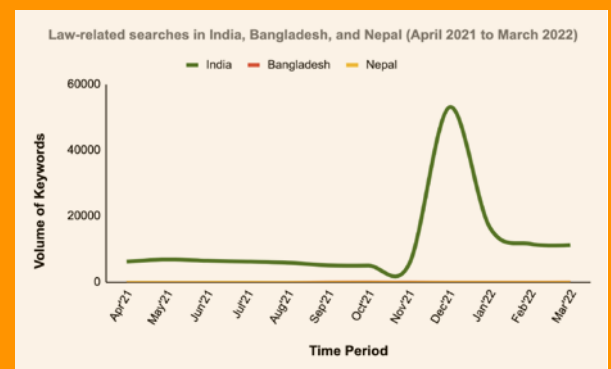
DIFFERENCES

Nepal had the maximum participation from NGOs on social media compared with India and Bangladesh

While comparing the overall discourse around child marriage, international and national NGO-led discourse was observed to be more prominent in Nepal, while discourse led by government institutions was more pronounced in India. In Bangladesh, local communities and CSOs led more discourse on Facebook than in the other two countries.

Child marriage last-mile support differed across countries

All three countries have adopted 1098 as the National Child Helpline number, and searches in India and Nepal are seen to redirect the user to this helpline number when searching for "child marriage helpline". In Bangladesh, there is dedicated helpline support for child marriage-specific issues. Further, NGO-led support is more prominent on the search platforms in India than in Nepal and Bangladesh.



RECOMMENDATIONS

As a platform, Facebook has the power and the potential to mobilize people on sensitive topics such as child marriage, as seen in India and Bangladesh. Therefore, it can be leveraged to bring people together, for example through public Facebook groups and pages.

The analysis revealed a high volume of law-related searches, especially in India; therefore, stakeholders and organizations can use digital platforms such as Facebook and YouTube to share legal information and resources such as one-page summaries of laws and updates on amendments to child marriage laws in the country.

“Call to action” messages and posts can be impactful as they prompt people to take proactive steps towards solving an issue. In this case, they are stopping child marriage. Short videos on Facebook and YouTube that end with a direct call to end child marriage or outline people’s role in ending the practice (e.g. “3 things you can do to report child marriage”) are likely to prompt people towards action.

Different platforms are widespread across the three countries; therefore, stakeholders should diversify their reach by engaging with audiences across various platforms. For instance, local and international NGOs in Nepal should amplify their messages through Twitter and view Facebook and YouTube as secondary platforms. On the other hand, in India and Bangladesh, Facebook and YouTube are popular platforms and see more engagement.

Since Twitter shows opposition to child marriage across all countries, it can be used to foster productive discussions on topics, for example in the form of two-line facts or live updates on amendments to laws (as seen in India). However, what the orientation of the discourse is towards adolescent sexuality agency needs to be explored further. Moreover, hashtags can spread awareness, generate traction and create a repository of meaningful content.

Organizations must focus on streamlining last-mile support across the three countries. This can be through sharing essential resources such as child hotline numbers, legal resources and counselling services for people to access quickly. This information can be shared on public Facebook groups, in short (1-2 minutes) videos on YouTube or as infographics on Twitter.

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CONCLUSION

With a population of 1.9 billion, South Asia is home to one fourth of the world, making it the most populous and densely populated region in the world.¹⁶ Among the constituent countries, India, Nepal and Bangladesh are “economies in transition”.¹⁷ All three countries share many things regarding language, culture and religion. They also share common economic, political and social problems that significantly challenge their path towards achieving high growth.

However, social practices such as child marriage continue to threaten these countries’ social fabric. They prevent children from reaching their full potential by denying access to education, livelihoods and good quality of life. On-ground interventions across the countries range from awareness campaigns by international organizations to sensitization sessions conducted in schools and other educational institutions by government organizations. This research shines the spotlight on the online space and the kinds of narratives related to child marriage that are prevalent and growing. Whether through a high volume of information-seeking searches or mobilization on Facebook and Twitter, online opposition to child marriage is both strong and prominent.

As we venture into an increasingly digital world, organizations working towards eradicating the practice of child marriage can leverage online platforms to supplement on-ground initiatives. It is essential to recognize the increasing importance of online mobilization. Moreover, it becomes imperative to adopt a multi-stakeholder approach to end the practice of child marriage. This means collaboration among government agencies, international organizations, NGOs and the general public. Ending harmful practices is possible – when the online and offline work together.

¹⁶ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=8S>

¹⁷ <https://www.orfonline.org/research/india-bangladesh-and-nepal-learning-lessons-facing-challenges/#:~:text=India%27s%20population%20is%201.29%20billion,and%20Nepal%27s%20is%2030%20million>

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