



# Educational Transformation and Gender Dynamics in Nepal: A Comprehensive Analysis of Literacy, Enrollment, Attainment, and Higher Education

Submission:

Nov 25, 2025

Acceptance:

Dec 10, 2025

Published:

Jan 31, 2026

Tilak Prasad Sharma<sup>1\*</sup> , Man Bahadur Sunuwar<sup>2</sup> <sup>1</sup> Department of Geography and Population Education, Mahendra Ratna Campus, Kathmandu, Tribhuvan University, Nepal<sup>2</sup> Department of Population Studies, Tri-Chandra Multiple Campus, Kathmandu, Nepal\*Corresponding Author: [tilak20013@gmail.com](mailto:tilak20013@gmail.com)<https://doi.org/10.3126/ed.v35i1.90363>

## Abstract

Educational access and attainment in Nepal have improved significantly over the last decades, but inequalities based on gender and geographical location continue to affect learning outcomes and higher-education enrollment. This study examines the patterns and inter-census changes in literacy, enrollment, educational attainment, and higher education distribution in Nepal. A quantitative, descriptive, and comparative research approach was used by utilizing secondary data such as the National Population and Housing Census (NPHC) 2021 and the earlier census data, complemented by education management information system (EMIS) reports, and publications from NPC and the University Grants Commission. Gender gaps over time and across regions were analyzed through comparative methods. The findings reveal notable increases in literacy, attendance, near-universal primary education, and greater female participation. However, gender disparities persist in higher education, STEM fields, and access in certain regions. The location of universities and field of study choices remains structurally biased, limiting fair progress. The transformation of education in Nepal is still incomplete. It is now essential to focus policies on improving quality, retention, gender-responsive strategies, and diversifying higher education opportunities to foster equitable and sustainable progress.

**Keywords:** Attainment, enrollment, educational transformation, gender dynamics, higher education, literacy

## To cite this article:

Sharma, T. P., & Sunuwar, M. B. (2026). Educational transformation and gender dynamics in Nepal: a comprehensive analysis of literacy, enrollment, attainment, and higher education. *Education and Development*, 35(1). 32–40. <https://doi.org/10.3126/ed.v35i1.90363>

## Introduction

Over the past 30 years, development in Nepal's political, social, and economic sectors has significantly redefined the country's education system, establishing education as a fundamental right and a key means of inclusive development (Government of Nepal, 2015; Regmi, 2017). These trends align with international policies such as EFA, MDGs, and the SDGs, which focus on gender equality in education (Aikman & Unterhalter, 2005; UNESCO, 2015). As a result, Nepal has made progress in access and in reducing historical gender gaps; however, gaps remain in literacy, enrollment, educational attainment, and participation in higher education (Bhatta, 2011; CEDAW Committee, 2018; MOEST, 2019).

The literacy rates have been steadily growing since the 1990s, and the female literacy rate is growing much faster

than the male literacy rate, thus narrowing the gender gap in Nepal (National Statistic Office [NSO], 2024; UNESCO Institute for Statistics [UIS], 2023). However, there are still prevalent disparities in gender, location, caste and ethnicity, as well as social status. Women, especially in the rural districts, Madhesi, Dalit, and some Native people, still show a lower literacy level than men and experience overlapping disadvantages (Bhatta, 2009). These differences mean that aggregate gains in literacy are covering up structural inequalities and complicated gender relations that define the beneficiaries of educational change and the degree of change.

In Nepal, school enrollment is gender balanced at the primary school stage and has seen significant increases at the lower secondary level (Acharya, 2021), with the help of such policies as free schooling, scholarships, and community promotions (Lanahan, 2017). Nevertheless,

**Copyright:** The Author(s) 2026. This is an open access journals distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY NC). <https://cerid.tu.edu.np/>



gendered trends are also present: girls are more likely to drop out due to early marriage, household, and poverty, whereas the dropout rates of boys in certain areas would be associated with labor migration and financial strains, indicating the situational and relative nature of gender inequalities (LeVine et al., 2012; Phorali, 2013).

Secondary education is still one of the problems of human capital and gender equality in Nepal. Although the number of women earning a secondary school education is increasing, the rates remain lower than those of men, and by region, caste, and household income (MOEST, 2019). Gender norms, early marriages, dowries, and the expectations of unpaid care work make the transition to upper secondary especially susceptible in girls, and despite legal and policy approaches to gender equality, they still interfere with the educational progression of girls (Gonick & Conrads, 2022; CEDAW Committee, 2018; Thapa, 2019).

Tertiary education is a very necessary but under-studied issue regarding the transformation of education in Nepal. In Nepal, higher education that occurs after Grade 12 is known as tertiary education, which comprises university, professional and higher technical education. According to national laws and policies, including the Education Act (1971, amended) and the National Education Policy (2019), tertiary education is offered by universities and other related enterprises managed by the University Grants Commission (UGC). Tertiary enrollment has increased at a very high rate since the 1990s because of the expansion of both the public and the privatized institutions, as well as the decentralization of the higher education sector (Bhatta, 2024; Pandey, 2023). Women have become more active and in certain cities, women are seen to be more than men in areas like education and humanities (Acharya et al., 2022). Despite the rapid expansion of tertiary education in Nepal, gender disparities persist; women remain underrepresented in STEM fields and in postgraduate and research-level programs (Sosale et al., 2023). Moreover, higher education is a more accurate reflection of social inequalities, where students, who belong to privileged caste, ethnic, and urban groups, are overrepresented, and structural disadvantages, such as language of instruction, financial constraints, and institutional support, have a disproportionate impact on women on the marginalized population (GC et al., 2024; Paudel, 2019).

All in all, the educational change in Nepal is an intricate, non-linear process that is affected by the historical factors, political factors, and social factors. Gender is subject to these forces and intersects with them, influencing and being influenced by policies, governance and educational practices. Experts underline that gender equality involves more than numerical equality, and one has to pay attention to the quality of learning, resource allocation, and replication of social power relations (Aikman & Unterhalter, 2005; Stromquist, 2021). In Nepal, a country with intersections between patriarchy, caste, and regional disparities, literacy, enrollment, attainment, and higher education can be analyzed to create subtleties of both

improvement and inequity (Dahal et al., 2023).

Although education in Nepal has been researched increasingly, there are still gaps. The majority of the research is based on one level, such as primary education, failing to associate literacy with higher education (Bhatta, 2011; Neupane, 2020). Gender differences remain analyzed in the absence of caste, ethnicity, region, and socioeconomic status, which do not allow insight into intersectional exclusion (Niumai, 2025). Also, policy reports offer descriptive statistics, but integrative analyses are required between quantitative trends and the political economy of educational reform, as well as the lived experience of different populations (Phorali, 2013; Regmi, 2017).

This paper fills these gaps by looking at the gendered educational outcomes in the life course. It examines the development and progressions of gender disparities in the context of simple literacy to tertiary education through the prism of overlapping social influences using national datasets and policy documents and previous research. Through the holistic approach, the study transcends the disaggregated measures of access in bringing out the processes of a cumulative nature that generate and reproduce educational advantage and disadvantage in Nepal.

This study is informed by intersectional and capabilities-based approaches. Intersectionality focuses on gender in relation to caste, ethnicity, class, and geography to influence the chances of education, in which women and men can be heterogeneous (Bazaz & Akram, 2021). A capabilities perspective dwells on the broadening of substantive freedoms of people in relation to their formal attainments and real ones, including fulfilling work and social involvement (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007). Combining these frameworks, one can critically determine whether the transformation of the educational system in Nepal promotes a more equal gender relationship.

## Methods

### Research Design

The research design used in this study was a quantitative, descriptive and comparative that served to examine the trends and dynamics of educational change and gender inequalities in Nepal. The research was conducted on literacy, school and college enrollment, educational attainment, and educational trends of higher education in the various census years, that is, in 2009/11 (when the 2011 Census took place) and in the year 2078 (when the 2021 Census will take place). This study was designed to analyze changes in time and gender differences in education using clearly defined indicators derived from census questions, surveys, and administrative records, based on the secondary sources of data.

### Data Sources

In the analysis, secondary data was used through the National Population and Housing Census (NPHC) 2011

and 2021, which was conducted by the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), Government of Nepal and which was utilized to identify the change in the study with time. The data was analyzed after analyzing the census questions on the literacy status, current school attendance, highest level of education completed and educational enrollment.

Supplementary to the census data on higher learning, particularly the tertiary education enrollment and gender distribution, the University Grants Commission (UGC) Nepal Annual Report 2024 data have been used. The study was premised on publicly accessible census data tables and CSV data made available by CBS and UGC.

### Variables and Indicators of the Data

The literature review made use of literacy rate, school attendance, college and university enrolment, and highest educational attainment based on the National Population and Housing Census (2011 and 2021), with the tertiary enrolment by gender added based on the UGC Annual Report 2024. The Gender Parity Index (GPI) and gender differentials ratios were used to measure gender disparities. All data were compared in sex, age bracket and geographical/ecological area to represent differences between subgroups of the population.

### Data Analysis Procedure

The data was cleaned, organized and analyzed in Microsoft Excel. The general patterns of educational attainment and gender discrepancies were introduced with the help of descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and ratios. To provide a more systematic evaluation, the trend analysis was performed in order to study the change

in literacy and enrollment between 2009/11 and 2078. Besides that, gender differentials across census periods were measured by comparing them.

### Ethical Considerations

Since this research was purely a secondary study, which relied on publicly accessible secondary data, and there was no direct human involvement. Nevertheless, the study was conducted in accordance with the conventional academic ethical standards as data sources were properly cited, and the contributions of institutions were acknowledged. The interpretation and analysis were carried out in a free and objective manner, without the distortion and manipulation of official data.

## Results and Discussion

### Literacy Rate

Table 1 shows the literacy status of individuals aged five years and above in Nepal in various census years between 1952/54 to 2078. Nepal's census has recorded a consistent increase in literacy for both men and women, although the gender gap remains stubbornly vast, but is narrowing. Male literacy rose from 9.5% (2001/11) to 83.6% (2078), but the female literacy rate registered a more significant increase; it was only 0.7% in 2001, which increased significantly to 69.4%. The most notable increases in females came after 2081 when school accessibility programs expanded as well as more gendered policies. Although an improvement is evident, women have less access to education than men, showing existing structural and socio-cultural barriers. Overall, the trend reflects sustained.

**Table 1:** Literacy of Persons Aged 5 Years or More in Nepal, by Census Year (1952/54- 2021)

Census Year	Literate		Literate		Literacy Rate (%)	
	Males	Females	Male	Female	Male	Female
1952/54	279,418	22,796	2,639,130	3,025,478	9.5	0.7
1961	Not available	16.3	1.8	—	16.3	1.8
1971	1,023,453	147,868	3,117,351	3,989,948	24.7	3.7
1981	1,882,293	591,980	3,505,321	4,538,294	34.9	11.5
1991	3,465,180	1,485,665	2,918,188	5,018,941	54.3	22.8
2001	5,511,707	3,477,638	2,764,752	4,898,220	66.6	41.5
2011	8,666,282	7,111,504	2,859,643	5,267,561	75.2	57.4
2021	10,830,886	9,547,094	2,127,450	4,209,942	83.6	69.4

Source: CBS 2014, NSO, 2024

The statistics show that policy intervention, growth of educational infrastructure, and gender-specific literacy programs or literacy programs after 1991 have played a significant role in enhancing literacy outcomes. The reduced gender gap is an indication of the inclusion of gender in education, albeit with certain gaps, especially in rural and marginalized areas. Generally, the long-term trend demonstrates a positive trend in literacy and gender parity, which facilitates the achievement of Nepal's overall

objectives, which are educational change and social development.

### School Attendance

Table 2 provides a comparison between the school and college attendance of the Nepalese population aged five years and above on the basis of the 2011 (2068) and 2021 (2078) National Census data. The results indicate that educational attendance has significantly improved over

the past ten years. The enrollment rate of those already in school or college rose significantly to 76.3 percent in 2021, as compared with 35.8 percent in 2011, as the whole country improved its access to education and awareness. Male participation also increased by 38.6 percent to 83.6 percent, and female participation also increased by 33.2 percent to 69.4 percent during the same time. Even though the percentage of boys attending schools is still slightly higher, the statistics show that there is a drastic decrease in inequality between the genders, which means that girls are becoming more included in formal education. The opposite situation is observed since the figure of the population that does not attend school or college dropped significantly during the timeframe of 2011 to 2021, as well as the

number of people who did not attend school, college, or both dropped significantly (3.9 percent in 2011 to 0.1 percent in 2021).

This is an indication that the universal access to basic educational and literacy programs, including free and compulsory education policies, school enrolment campaigns and gender-based interventions, have worked in enhancing participation in education. In general, the findings demonstrate the high rates of educational development and the reduction of gender disparities in Nepal between 2011 and 2021, in accordance with the national and international targets in providing inclusive and equitable quality education.

**Table 2:** Status of Persons Currently Attending School/College and Those Not Attending, according to the National Census 2011 (2068) and 2021 (2078)

Description	2011			2021		
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
Currently attending school/college	8,569,339	4,453,631	4,115,708	20,393,215	10,838,358	9,554,857
%	35.8	38.6	33.2	76.3	83.6	69.4
Not attending school/college	14,415,168	6,652,506	7,762,662	6,317,171	2,117,726	4,199,445
%	60.2	57.7	62.6	23.6	16.3	30.5
Not reported	942,034	427,947	514,087	14,909	6,942	7,967
%	3.9	3.7	4.1	0.1	0.1	0.1
Total	23,926,541	11,534,084	12,392,457	26,725,407	12,963,138	13,762,380

Source: NSO, 2024

### The Status of Persons During Their Studies

According to the National Census 2011 (2068) and 2021 (2078), people are categorized in terms of the type of schooling and studying activity: people in formal schooling (school/college), those who are in non-formal schooling, those in self-studying or study-related activities, and those who are not doing any activity related to studying. In this categorization, there is the involvement of various types of education other than enrollment. Table 3 shows the educational status of the population reaching the age of five years and above who are engaged in education in Nepal, according to the 2021 (2078) National Population Census. The statistics demonstrate that the percentage of the population involved in some kind of studying activity is high (43.1), which suggests that a wide range of people participate in formal and informal education. Of these, 32.6 percent of the population is in the form of formal school attendance (school/college), with the percentage (34.6) of males being slightly higher than the percentage (30.7) of females. This small gender difference is an indication of the ongoing struggles toward equality in education, but

also points to the areas of further enhancement of female involvement, especially at the higher tiers of education. The rate of non-formal education (0.5) and self-study (0.2) is relatively low, implying that most of the learners are absorbed in the formal education system. In the meantime, 23.6 percent of the population stated that they do not participate in any study-related activity, and an even higher proportion of the female population (30.5), as compared to males (16.3), express this.

The percentage of people who have never attended school (0.1) is low, which highlights the fact that Nepal has almost universal access to the primary level of education. All in all, the census statistics of 2021 also highlight the significant advancements of educational participation in Nepal, along with the increasing inclusivity and decreased educational exclusion. Nonetheless, the ongoing gender disparities in participation, especially the non-formal ones, point to the necessity of having rather specific interventions and gender-sensitive education policies to reach 100% education equality.

**Table 3:** Status of Persons Currently Studying, Engaged in Study Activities, or Not Studying — Census 2021 (2078)

Description	2021		
	Total	Male	Female
Formal schooling (school/college)	8,703,972	4,481,146	4,222,826
%	32.60	34.60	30.70
Non-formal education	121,656	34,499	87,157
%	0.50	0.30	0.60
Self-study	45,632	21,497	24,135
%	0.20	0.20	0.20
Engaged in study-related activities	11,521,955	6,301,216	5,220,739
%	43.10	48.60	37.90
Not engaged in study-related activities	6,317,171	2,117,726	4,199,445
%	23.60	16.30	30.50
No reported	14,909	6,942	7,967
%	0.10	0.10	0.10
Total	26,725,295	12,963,026	13,762,269

Sources: NSO,2024

### Level of Education

Table 4 displays the population distribution of Nepal aged five and above based on the highest level of education attained in 2021 (2078). The data shows a gender balance across most education levels, which reflects ongoing progress in gender equality in education. Most people have completed primary education (22.8%), while around 19.1% have finished secondary or lower secondary education, indicating that basic and secondary education form the foundation of Nepal's educational structure. This trend demonstrates the success of national strategies aimed at universal primary education and expanding access to secondary education. Notably, 15.4 percent of the population has earned a certificate or higher, highlighting a growing shift toward post-secondary education. Although the percentage of individuals with higher education degrees (Bachelor's 4.7% and Master's 2.4%) remains relatively low, it is increasing, suggesting an expanding base of graduates in Nepal's higher education sector.

There are slight differences between males and females at the Master and certificate levels (3 percent and 16.4 percent, respectively), indicating the new gender balance trends at the advanced levels of education. Low rates of any kind of lack of education (1.3% of 1.1% unreported and no successful completion, respectively) and the low proportions of those with no education (1.3%), as well as those with unreported education (1.1%), highlight almost universal participation in some sort of schooling. All in all, the data represent that Nepal has already reached a wide range of educational coverage and gender equality in the lower levels of education, yet further policy consideration is required to facilitate women's participation and retention in higher levels and postgraduate education so that equitable educational transformation can be achieved at every level.

**Table 4:** Educational Level Completed, 2078 (2021)

Educational Level Completed	Total		Male		Female	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Pre-primary level	942	2.9	491	3.0	451	2.8
Primary level	7,358	22.8	3,650	22.5	3,708	23.0
Lower secondary level	6,178	19.1	3,128	19.3	3,050	18.9
Secondary level	6,190	19.1	3,154	19.4	3,036	18.9
SLC / Equivalent	3,621	11.2	1,939	11.9	1,682	10.5
Certificate Level / Equivalent	4,986	15.4	2,354	14.5	2,632	16.4
Bachelor's Degree / Equivalent	1,522	4.7	760	4.7	762	4.7
Master's Degree / Equivalent	760	2.4	479	3.0	281	1.7
Other	14	0.0	8	0.0	6	0.0
No level / Level not completed	415	1.3	129	0.8	286	1.8
Not stated	343	1.1	142	0.9	201	1.2
Total	32,329	100	16,234	100	16,095	100

Source: NSO,2024

**Table 5:** Distribution by Field of Study Completed — Census 2078 (2021)

Field of Study	Total		Male		Female	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Humanities & Social Sciences	724	10.0	409	11.4	315	8.6
Management	2,833	39.0	1,516	42.2	1,317	35.8
Education	2,254	31.0	831	23.1	1,423	38.7
Science & Technology	379	5.2	250	7.0	129	3.5
Health / Medical Sciences	180	2.5	59	1.6	121	3.3
Engineering	126	1.7	102	2.8	24	0.7
Law	60	0.8	55	1.5	5	0.1
Agriculture	22	0.3	15	0.4	7	0.2
Forestry	19	0.3	7	0.2	12	0.3
Veterinary / Animal Science / Fisheries	11	0.2	6	0.2	5	0.1
Computer / Information Technology	26	0.4	16	0.4	10	0.3
Other	125	1.7	76	2.1	49	1.3
Not Stated	509	7.0	251	7.0	258	7.0
Total	7,268	100	3,593	100	3,675	100

Source: NSO, 2024

### Gender Patterns and Field Diversification in Higher Education

The Field of Study Completed Distribution Census 2078 (2021) Graduates in Nepal are concentrated within a

small number of occupations, namely: Management (39%), Education (31%), and Humanities and Social Sciences (10%), which make up about 80% of graduates (Census 2021). Gender trends are maintained as males' dominance in Management, Science and Technology, as well as Engineering, whereas females are over-represented in Education and Health/Medical Sciences. Such fields as Agriculture, Forestry, Law, and IT are marginal, and 7% of graduates have not indicated a field. These trends reveal inadequate diversity in disciplinary facets and accentuate the necessity to increase technical and professional aspects and facilitate gender inclusivity to facilitate healthy human resource growth and sustainable development.

### **Status of Higher Education in Nepal**

The higher education system of Nepal is extremely centralized and dominated by Tribhuvan University (TU),

which covers 77.6 percent of total enrollment (491,299 students) and has 1,115 campuses, where the largest number of graduates are produced and the largest number of faculty work (UGC, 2024). The smaller yet important proportions of Pokhara and Purbanchal Universities are growing the opportunities spread out of Kathmandu. Other colleges, such as Far Western, Kathmandu and Mid-West Universities are small contributors, with the specialized and newer universities catering to niche markets or being in their initial developmental phases. Increased access through the growth of the private and community campuses presents both benefits and challenges to quality and equitable resource distribution of the academic endeavors, and is indicative of both centralization and incremental diversification in the higher education environment of Nepal.

**Table 6: Status of Higher Education Institutions in Nepal (Reproduced from User-Provided Data)**

S.N.	University	Constituent	Private	Community	Total	Share %	Constituent	Private	Community	Total	Graduates	Teachers
Central Universities												
1	TU	174487	114350	202462	491,299	77.61	62	517	536	1,115	74,149	8,122
2	FWU	19356	-	-	19,356	3.06	16	-	-	16	1,194	408
3	KU	12185	8868	-	21,053	3.33	7	15	-	22	3,078	496
4	LBU	679	1153	-	1,832	0.29	3	9	-	12	105	46
5	MU	10069	1102	-	11,171	1.76	19	1	-	20	1,327	393
6	AFU	4,066	-	-	4,066	0.64	9	8	-	17	871	180
7	NSU	2623	485	187	3,295	0.52	11	7	3	21	825	760
8	POKU	4860	30340	-	35,200	5.56	11	57	-	68	7,651	195
9	PU	3571	34629	1,580	39,780	6.28	9	118	4	126	7,856	108
10	RJU	527	-	-	527	0.08	1	-	-	1	-	59
11	MBUST	15	-	-	15	0.0	1	-	-	1	-	10
12	NOU	1,634	-	-	1,634	0.26	1	-	-	1	268	16

Source: UGC, annual report 2024

Table 7 results indicate the status of the provincial and medical universities in Nepal according to UGC (2024). These institutions make up a small yet increasing proportion of the higher education system as compared to central universities. Gandaki University (GU) has the largest number of students with 474, whereas the universities of Madhesh (MAU), Lumbini Technical (LTU) and Mid-West Technical (MTU) demonstrate little initial potential, which is the reason why these institutions are new. B.P. Koirala Institute of Health Sciences (BPKIHS) is the top institution in the medical field, with 1,459 enrolled students and 305

teaching staff and is succeeded by NAMS and MBAHS, which are crucial in training medical professionals. There are other specialized academies like PAHS, KAHs, POKAHS that also help in generating skilled manpower in medicine and allied sciences. All in all, these institutions point to the continued diversification and decentralization of the Nepal higher education system. Their limited size and the concentration of resources in several institutions, though, underscore the dire need to invest more and institutionalize them to improve the equity and capacity in higher and medical education in the region.

**Table 7: Provincial and Medical Academies Universities**

S.N.	Uni-versity	Constit-uent	Private	Com-munity	Total	Share %	Constit-uent	Pri-va-te	Com-munity	Total	Gradu-ates	Teach-ers
	Prov-in-cial											
1	MAU	141	-	-	141	0.02	1	-	-	1	-	14
2	LTU	35	-	-	35	0.01	1	-	-	1	-	6
3	GU	474	-	-	474	0.07	1	-	-	1	-	54
4	MTU	109	-	-	109	0.02	1	-	-	1	-	-
Medical Academies												
1	NAMS	459	-	-	459	0.07	1	-	-	1	331	379
2	MBAHS	629	-	-	629	0.1	1	-	-	1	-	113
3	PO-kaHs	88	-	-	88	0.01	1	-	-	1	-	102
4	RAHS	-	-	-	-	0	1	-	-	1	-	-
5	KAHS	181	-	-	181	0.03	1	-	-	1	26	84
6	PAHS	250	-	-	250	0.04	1	-	-	1	232	232
7	BPKIHS	1,459	-	-	1,459	0.23	1	-	-	1	592	305
Parliament Passed the University Bill												
1	YAU	-	-	-	-	0	1	-	-	1	-	-
Grand Total		237,897	190,927	204,229	633,053	100	164	723	545	1,432	97,564	12,082

Source: UGC, annual report 2024

## Discussion

### Literacy Developments and Education Profits

The dramatic increase in literacy in Nepal, 9.5 in 2009/11 to 83.6 in 2021, indicates several decades of policy, infrastructure development and outreach education. This is not isolated but is also consistent with national-level research that indicates that the level of women's literacy has been increasing by large numbers over the same period (Acharya & Pant, 2019). The social implications of an increase in female literacy are more far-reaching: an increase in literacy corresponds to lower fertility and mortality rates, which in turn lead to better reproductive health and social well-being in general (Adhikari & Adhikari, 2025). The results highlight the importance of such enlargement of literacy, especially among women, as not just a way to encourage education but also a source of broader developmental gains.

### Gender Inequality: Otherness Closing but Not Without Problems

Statistics show that, despite the reduction of gender disparities in literacy and school/college attendance, there are still disparities in higher education, major and institutional representation. This is consistent with studies that reveal that the enrollment of girls has improved, although the learning outcomes are usually lower than boys, particularly in the general schools (Acharya, 2022). The same socio-cultural norms, early marriage, limited

movements, and domestic activities are also poised to be the major factors that constrained retention and performance of girls, as indicated by qualitative evidence in Madhesh Province (Sharma, 2022). Consequently, a near-universal enrollment does not imply equality in the educational quality, retention, and achievement, and the persistence of disparities is an indicator of the structural inequalities, which go beyond access, such as socio-cultural barriers, school settings, and quality of instruction.

### Structural Issues in Higher Education and Discipline Segregation

Highest educational attainment and field-of-study distributions indicate that although the number of both certificate and bachelor degrees is rising, a small number of people receive master's degrees and more people receive higher degrees, with men representing technical and professional and women having a concentration in Education and Health/Medical sciences. This is a reflection of structural issues of higher education in Nepal: women are not well represented in leadership, technical sectors, and decision-making, and it is difficult to improve even with access (Shrestha & Rijal, 2024). Similarly, the segmentation of the study disciplines by gender limits women's socio-economic mobility and empowerment in the long term (Koirala, 2023). These institutional capacity limitations, diversity of discipline, and gender-based segregation contribute to why attainment of advanced degrees is still low, and gender inequality is still evident at advanced levels of education.

## The Inequality of Unequal Development: Social, Cultural, and Regional

Nationwide statistics obscure larger differences in the educational performance among regions and social classes. Women who are marginalized, rural, and have low incomes face greater challenges to further education. The same could be said about Madhesh Province, where girls are forced to leave school early due to gender norms, early marriage, limited mobility, and household duties (Sharma, 2022). Further funding of public education could be cut by 15 percent in FY 2014/ 15 to 10.95 percent in FY 2024/ 25, which will further increase these disparities and jeopardize outreach, quality, and equitable allocation of resources (Koirala, 2024). Therefore, although the country gains in education, the inequity in education is not evenly spread and marginalized girls are at risk of dropping out, poor performance and limited mobility in learning.

## Conclusion

This paper demonstrates that achieving meaningful gains in gender equality in education requires a shift beyond access-based strategies to focus on long-term improvements in quality, retention, and learning outcomes. The finding of current literature evidence indicates that girls and disadvantaged populations are still confronting structural barriers based on sociocultural norms, unequal distribution of resources, insufficient opportunities to obtain higher education, and declining public investment. The analysis has pointed out that specific interventions like better school conditions, increased teaching ability, elastic assistance systems, and increased engagement in higher studies are necessary in minimizing inequalities.

Simultaneously, the continuous disparities that are evident on the regional, caste/ethnic, and socioeconomic levels demonstrate the necessity of gender-sensitive budgeting and long-term policy investment. Future studies need to be disaggregated and longitudinal to have a better follow-up of the educational paths and comprehend the dynamics of the inequalities. In general, the results confirm that a fair and inclusive education can be realized only in the case of a coordinated policy action, long-term resources, and evidence-based strategies that cover the two aspects of access and quality.

## Funding

This study did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

## Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declare no conflict of interest related to this study.

## Data Availability

The data used in this study are derived from publicly available secondary sources and are cited within the article.

## References

Acharya, D. R. (2021). Status of girls' participation in higher education in Nepal. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Perspectives in Higher Education*, 6(2), 68-85.

Acharya, M., Acharya, K. P., & Gyawali, K. (2022). Higher education status in Nepal: Possibilities and prospects. *The Educator Journal*, 10(1), 105-118.

Acharya, S. (2024). Problems and opportunities of girls' education: A case study Namobuddha, Kavre. *Journal of History Association of Nepal*, 10(1), 33-41.

Acharya, S., & Robinson-Pant, A. (2019). Women, literacy and health: Comparing health and education sectoral approaches in Nepal. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 49(2), 211-229.

Adhikari, S. U., & Adhikari, S. P. (2025). Empowering women through education: Trends of literacy rate and its impact on fertility and mortality in Nepal. *Curriculum Development Journal*, 33(47), 49-60.

Aikman, S., & Unterhalter, E. (Eds.). (2005). *Beyond access: Transforming policy and practice for gender equality in education*. Oxfam.

Bazaz, R. Y., & Akram, M. (2021). Exploring gender and caste intersectionality among muslims: A sociological study. *Journal of Education, Culture and Society*, 12(2), 190-210.

Belbase, N. P. (2025). Challenges and opportunities of continuing girls' education in Nepal. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Management and Social Sciences*, 6(1), 206-214.

Bhatta, N. P. (2024). Governance models in education: insights for nepal's federal education system. *AMC Journal*, 5(1), 34-52.

Bhatta, P. (2009). Education in Nepal: Problems, reforms, and social change.

Bhatta, P. (2011). Aid agency influence in national education policy-making: A case from Nepal's 'Education for All' movement. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 9(1), 11-26. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2010.513590>

Bhatta, S. D. (2008). Tackling the problems of quality and disparity in Nepal's school education: The OLPC model. *Studies in Nepali History and Society*, 11(1), 00-00.

CEDAW Committee. (2018). *Concluding observations on the sixth periodic report of Nepal (CEDAW/C/NPL/CO/6)*. United Nations.

Central Bureau of Statistics. (2012 & 2022). *National population census 2068 & 2078*. Central Bureau of Statistics.

Central Bureau of Statistics. (2014). *Population monograph of Nepal 2014: Volume II (Social demography)*. Government of Nepal, National Planning Commission Secretariat.

Dahal, T., Topping, K., & Levy, S. (2023). Patriarchy, gender norms and female student dropout from high schools in Nepal. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 53(6), 1005-1023.

Ghimire, A., & Samuels, F. (2014). *Change and continuity in social norms and practices surrounding marriage and education in Nepal* (pp. 1-105).

Gonick, M., & Conrads, J. (2022). Gender, sexuality, adolescence, and identity in schooling. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education*.

Government of Nepal. (2015). *The Constitution of Nepal 2015*.

Koirala, J. (2024). Nepalese stock market in the light of its growth: Problems and prospects. *Signature*.

Koirala, P. (2023). Women's empowerment in higher education in Nepal. *Interdisciplinary Research in Education*, 8(1), 153-164.

Lanahan, B. (2017). *Post-conflict education for democracy and reform*. Palgrave Macmillan.

LeVine, R. A., LeVine, S., Schnell-Anzola, B., Rowe, M. L., & Dexter, E. (2011). *Literacy and mothering: How women's schooling changes the lives of the world's children*. Oxford University Press.

Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. (2019). *Education in figures 2019: At a glance*. Government of Nepal.

National Statistics Office. (2024). *National population and housing census 2021 (National report)*. National Statistics Office.

Neupane, P. (2020). Policy framework for education development in Nepal. *International Education Studies*, 13(1), 89-97.

Niumai, A. (2025). Intersecting inequalities: Unravelling gender and social exclusion in contemporary society. *Journal of Social and Economic Development*, 1-8.

Pandey, B. (2023). An assessment of neoliberal policy in higher education in Nepal: Political economy perspective. *Journal of Population and Development*, 4(1), 1-20.

Paudel, K. P. (2019). *Knowledge management and academic performance of higher educational institutions in Nepal* [Doctoral dissertation, Kathmandu University School of Education].

Pherali, T. J. (2013). Schooling in violent situations: The politicization of education in Nepal, before and after the 2006 peace agreement. *Prospects*, 43(1), 49-67.

Regmi, K. D. (2017). World Bank in Nepal's education: Three decades of neoliberal reform. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 15(2), 188-201.

Sharma, A. (2022). Understanding the influence of socio-cultural factors in school drop out of girls: A study in two districts of Madhesh province, Nepal. *Samriddhi Journal of Development Studies*, 8(1), 1-8.

Shrestha, N., & Rijal, M. (2024). Gender equality in the higher education workforce in Nepal. *Journal of Kathmandu BernHardt College*, 6(1), 102-117.

Sosale, S., Harrison, G. M., Tognatta, N., & Nakata, S. (2023). *Engendering access to STEM education and careers in South Asia*. World Bank Publications.

Stromquist, N. P. (2021). Expanding the field of comparative and international education: The inclusion of gender. In *Comparative and international education: Leading perspectives from the field* (pp. 129-143). Springer International Publishing.

Surya Bahadur, G. C., Gurung, S. K., Poudel, R. L., Yadav, U. S., Bhattacharjee, A., & Dhungana, B. R. (2024). The effect of higher education service quality on satisfaction among business students in India and Nepal. *Cogent Education*, 11(1), 2393521.

Thapa, S. (2019). Progress and lags in educational attainment in Nepal. *Higher Education in Nepal* (pp. 37-50). Routledge.

UNESCO. (2015). *Strong emphasis on gender equality in and through education*. UNESCO.

Walker, M., & Unterhalter, E. (2007). The capability approach: Its potential for work in education. In *Amartya Sen's capability approach and social justice in education* (pp. 1-18). Palgrave Macmillan US.