


Challenges and Opportunities of Continuing Girl's Education in Nepal

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Abstract

Girls' education in Nepal, particularly in rural areas, remains a significant challenge despite various national and international efforts to promote girls' education. This study aims to examine the socio-cultural, economic, and institutional factors that have affected girls' education in rural areas. The data were collected from five community schools using a mixed-method approach. Formal and informal communications with students, parents, teachers, and community members were employed to make the description concise and precise. Quantitative data were collected from surveys, and qualitative insights were obtained from interviews, focus group discussions, and observations. The finding revealed that deeply rooted sociocultural norms, economic hardships, and gender-based discrimination are the primary barriers to girls' education. More household responsibilities, less priority for school education, and frequently subjected to early marriage against the law are the hindering factors of girls' education. Regardless of the government's free education policy, many families cannot afford supplementary educational costs like uniforms and stationery. Gender stereotypes favoring sons over daughters, insufficient female teachers, and a less supportive school environment have maintained dropout rates. The study highlights critical strategies to address these challenges, including raising community awareness about the value of girls' education, providing scholarships, ensuring access to free educational materials, increasing female representation among teachers, and implementing empowerment programs. These interventions, with gender equality policies, can mitigate the barriers and foster a supportive environment for girls' education. The research contributes to the broader discourse on educational equity and emphasizes the transformative potential of targeted, context-sensitive interventions in advancing girls' education in Nepal.

Keywords: *Girl's education, education system, empowerment, Nepal, policy practice*

Introduction

Rural girls' education progress has remained low. Girls of the age group 6-15 were out of school. Many economic and social constraints can mitigate girls' participation in education. Girls were engaged in domestic work, caring for younger children, helping mothers, and cutting grass for domestic animals (Shrestha, 2008). Primary education has developed significantly since 1971 when the national education system plan, which emphasized the promotion of primary education, was introduced. Primary education received further impetus with the declaration of free primary education in 1975 and the provision of free primary textbooks since 1978. The government is committed to making basic and primary education available to all children in the age group 6-10 years by 2000 (CBS, 2010).

In our context, the total literacy rate is 76.2%. Only 69.4% of girls are literate (CBS, 2021). Most of our communal society still prevails regarding girls' enrollment and dropouts. This is because of the economic condition of the Nepalese people. In Nepal, girls begin to work even at 6, and 6-9-year-old girls work 4-7 hours a day depending upon the family's economic condition. In this regard, the workload of baby girls increases with their age, which encourages the schooling and dropouts of girls. Even though primary education is free and free of textbooks, the parents cannot afford other utilities such as pencils, dresses, bags, papers, etc. This economic barrier plays a vital role in girls' out-schooling.

The female situation in Nepal is a trajectory from the system of burning a wife with the dead husband's body to the 21st Century world. Despite the new education system being developed or established, girls are still inferior to boys. Girls are not enjoying the discourse of our sociocultural environment. They are controlled from the beginning to the end of life: under their parents' control before marriage, controlled by their husband as a service provider after marriage, and controlled by sons and daughters-in-law during their elderly life.

Every girl thinks she is unlucky to be a girl. The study explores the factors influencing girls' status and education in rural community schools, particularly the efforts to empower girls. First, it explores the sociocultural context of girl education. Then, it unfolds the rural community school context and unearths the influencing factors of girl education.

Review Literature

This study includes the sociocultural context of girl education from the past to the present, the nation's policy, and existing practices in community schools to empower girls. Finally, it shows the gaps to be filled. The popular belief in rural Nepalese society is that education for girls is not necessary for bearing and caring for children, doing household work, and taking care of family members. They are required to be honest, polite, gentle, and cultured. For this, they need to be trained and nurtured similarly. On the other side, the constitution of Nepal states that education is the fundamental right of the people.

Nevertheless, our social tradition is that females engage in domestic activities, whereas males perform outside jobs. This social discrimination still affects the balance of education in our society. So, people are hesitant to send their daughters to school and engage them in perfect household chores that they

can perform well after marriage (Garner, 2010). Girls from rural areas are still lagging because of this conservative belief.

Ability is nothing in the absence of an opportunity. Our traditional male-dominant society places more importance on sons than daughters. That is why a girl is supposed to belong to another person's house by which marriage is attached to the persisted of the parents. Considering these views, parents desire to marry their daughters with a proper match. Thus, our society is killing the girls' potential ability (CERID, 2009). The history of female education is not so long.

Until 1950, there was no systematic education system for ordinary people, and the practice of giving education to girls was banned entirely. Education was not publicly considered suitable for women, and the belief that "Women who read become witches" was made so prevalent in society that even those who could provide education for girls hesitated for fear of ostracism and political torture. In such an environment, a girl's education is confined to only housekeeping and childbearing (Luintel, 2008). In this view, our society was very much biased toward female education in the past. However, this concept is gradually comedown and challenging century suppression.

Women were born not to get an education but to look after domestic affairs, which was rooted deeply in our society before democracy. UNICEF (2010) states that the level of women's education is low in Nepal and lowest in SAARC countries. The adult female literarily is 34% for Nepal compared to Srilanka (94%), India (58%), Bangladesh (53%), and Pakistan (48%). The campaign for improving women's status has influenced the role of education. Education is believed to reduce gender inequalities and uplift women's societal position. Women's education has a higher social status and stable family size (UNICEF, 2010).

The development of female education plays a decisive role in a country's socio-economic development. The government of Nepal declared free education for all up to SLC level and textbooks for girls up to grade five free of cost. The tenth plan (2002-2007) emphasized the gradual introduction of compulsory primary education and national literacy campaigns to achieve the "Education for all" goals. The plan stresses the need to improve the quality of primary education (Ghimire, 2009).

Marx and Angles (1884), in "Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State," mainly enroll those who are backward into the mainstream, making them aware of education. It is fairly safe to agree with the principle of Marx, which wants to explore the possible reasons for the minimum presence of female students at the primary level. Primary education has been realized as a basic need. Various national and international efforts have been made to globalize primary education. The Primary Education Project (1985-1992), Seti Project (1983), Basic and Primary Education Project BPEP I (1992-1997) (Ghimire, 2009), and the recently introduced Basic Primary Education Project BPEP II (1999-2004) are examples of national attempts in primary education. A girl will be a mother tomorrow.

A mother gives birth to a child and provides hospitality and pre-primary education for that child to survive in that society. William Worth said, "If you give me a good mother, I will give you a good child." This means that if we educate a girl, that will affect the whole family as well as society. This shows the importance and need for girls' education. Nevertheless, even these efforts are still far from educating girls.

Only 28.8 percent of girls in the 6-10 years age group are going to school. Regarding the female occupation, more than 36% of the female population was adopted as homemakers and inactive. Women engaged in non-agriculture activities have more significant ages at marriage and fewer children born than their counterparts involved in agriculture, manual working, and domestic activities. Today, 59% of school-age girls attend primary schools, and of the total population enrollment, 40.6% were girls (MOE, BPEP II, 1999).

Further, the BPEP II (1999) highlighted that the girls' promotion, repetition, and drop-out rates were 37.8%, 38.8%, and 23.4%, respectively. This figure shows a serious problem in girls' education, and the inefficiency occurs mainly due to grade repetition and dropouts. Taking note of the girl's high dropout rate in grade one and an independent study has not been concocted so far to find out the causes of dropouts of the girls, the present study entitled "Continuing Girls Education in Public Schools at Kamalimai Municipality in Sindhuli District" has been proposed.

Policy and practices to empower women are conflicting in some cases. The constitution, in clause no. 38, states that every woman shall have an equal right to lineage without any gender discrimination (Government of Nepal, 2020). However, girls experience discrimination from their parents' lap to the school, from our religious beliefs to sociocultural practices. The Gender Quality Act 2006, National Education Policy 2020, and programs and events organized to mitigate discrimination and promote girls' access to education, health services, and economic opportunities have improved girls' empowerment.

These efforts have brought significant change in early marriage, gender-based violence, and girls' access to resources and opportunities. However, Gender-based disparities and efforts to promote the rights, education, and well-being of girls in the culturally and socioeconomically diverse school context can be seen. According to the Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) Strategy 2021-2023, "The Constitution of Nepal is a significant milestone for the promotion of GESI to ensure equal rights for women" (Government of Nepal, 2023). Considering the new municipality, established in 1997, and the study area's mixed ethnic groups of hill native people, this study aims to conduct the present study, hoping that it may help educational planners and respective readers.

Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach integrating both quantitative and qualitative research design. The quantitative component involved a structured questionnaire survey, whereas the qualitative component included in-depth interviews, observations, and focus group discussions (Creswell, 2012). Quantitative data were collected using structured questionnaires. In-depth interviews were conducted with teachers and parents of girls studying in grade ten. Classrooms and discourses in and outside the class were observed following observation guidelines.

Similarly, participants were interviewed in-depth to explore their experiences, perspectives, and insights. Developing a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) guidelines, five FGDs were organized together with collective insights from students. The FGDs made interaction dynamic to uncover diverse viewpoints and shared experiences. In the study, quality standards were maintained through credibility and transferability. Credibility was maintained with data triangulation and member

checking. Similarly, transferability was achieved through detailed descriptions of the research context and participants, enabling readers to assess the applicability of findings to other contexts.\

Ethical issues were maintained thoroughly, including informed consent, voluntary participation, anonymity, and confidentiality (Arifin, 2018). Survey data were analyzed using statistical software, and relations between variables were studied while quantitative data was analyzed. In the case of qualitative data, the data collected from the field was transcribed and translated. Then, the transcribed and translated data were coded, thematized, and analyzed.

Results and Discussion

In a patriarchal society, every couple prefers sons. In other words, girls are inferior to boys in the Nepalese socio-cultural context. However, studies show that the status and involvement of girls in school are increasing. The diagram below describes the girls' enrollment and dropouts in the community schools of Arghaakhanchi. It then describes the factors hindering continuing girls' education in the study area.

Figure 1. Girl Enrolment and Dropouts in Argakhanchi

Grade	S1		S2		S3		S4		S5		Total Students	Girl Dropout
	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys		
1	16	15	4	11	25	18	12	11	11	11	134	0
2	13	13	6	9	15	12	13	13	9	11	114	2
3	15	14	9	13	14	11	11	14	7	8	116	1
4	17	15	11	9	16	10	9	12	9	12	120	3
5	21	26	7	11	17	12	10	9	7	8	128	1
6	15	12	5	12	13	13	8	7	6	7	98	4
7	23	17	6	10	11	13	5	9	4	8	106	6
8	21	15	12	11	9	11	8	10	3	9	109	5
9	15	11	9	14	13	17	7	8	4	11	109	7
10	14	12	11	16	12	18	4	6	5	10	108	6
11	16	14	12	13	9	11	5	7	3	9	99	9
12	12	11	8	8	4	9	3	9	2	7	73	8
Total	198	175	100	137	158	155	95	115	70	111	1314	52

Source: Field survey, 2022

Gender-wise Student description of Five Community Schools in Arghakhanchi

Factors Influencing Girl's Education

Traditionally, girls are often viewed as a burden, perceived primarily as service providers, and raised for the benefit of others. Regardless of their education, they are expected to become housewives. Boys are empowered and freed from the outside world, whereas girls are not. The study identified six key factors influencing girls' education.

One of them is family and society. In families, girls are nurtured to be like their mothers: working in the kitchen, caring for children, and doing household work. From the beginning, they are expected to be polite, shy, cute-looking, and gentle. In contrast, the boys are pushed toward the outer world, empowering them to be bold, assertive, aggressive, and struggling. Parent respondents say they do not participate in the decision-making process in any work or things themselves in the family. Girls in small families, particularly nuclear families, are better empowered than those in joint families.

Most female respondents expressed that females in joint families have more challenges in earning an education because they are responsible for household chores and staying in order with their parents inside the house. So, we are weak in any developing and educational fields. In this way, the joint family is the factor that influences girls' education. They cannot make decisions themselves. They are only machines for product children's and household machines. Most of the household females have working hours ranging from 6-8 hours per day, such as cooking, fetching water, carrying children from school, cutting grass, farming vegetables, etc.

In this study, a question was asked to the respondents, and they replied that the male members are more involved in work outside the household, like going to the market, being involved in jobs and social participation and taking and giving loans than female members. Male members are rarely involved in household management and chores compared to females. So, female members are engaged in inside household work, and they cannot earn an education. Early marriage is another serious issue that limits girls from formal education. "Early marriages also remove young girls from school and have serious physical, social, and emotional consequences" (King & Winthrop, 2015, as cited in Gautam, 2016).

The next factor is the belief that sons and daughters are different and treated similarly. Nepalese society has different perceptions and expectations of them. Our society regrets the birth of a daughter, and the family still expects a son despite the number of daughters. Parents do not want to understand that sons and daughters can take leading roles equally in the future if they get any opportunity. The headteachers and teachers responded that daughters can help their parents in the future as sons if they are empowered with education, provided equal opportunities in any field, and supported by their parents. Some teacher participants assert that daughters support their parents more heartedly than sons.

The third factor is the parents' interest and contribution to empowering their daughter with formal education. Education is essential for both girls and boys. However, education for boys is prioritized more than for girls. Education helps girls' physical, mental, social, and emotional development. Education empowers girls to achieve success and enhances their self-confidence. Ultimately, it makes them good citizens with life skills and leadership qualities. Girls are absent more than boys in their class.

The other factor is gender discrimination to educate sons and daughters. Due to the lack of awareness, our community discriminates against sons and daughters. Sending the sons with enough nutritious food and suitable clothing, and vice versa to the daughters, providing sons to study in high-level schools with excessive payment of fees, and sending the daughters to government schools for free education are worth noticing instances of discrimination.

The researcher found the opinion of guardians and teachers on how female students could get an education without having access to the school. When asked, "Do you manage your daughters to go to

school?" six guardians replied that they had sent their daughters to school, and the rest answered that they could not send them because of the household work.

The last factor is parents' or guardians' economic conditions. All the responses of guardians and teachers show that the guardians are poverty-stricken. They are continuing the traditional occupation. They work on the farms of wealthy landowners to pay the ancestral loans inherited from the chains of fathers, grandfathers, and more. Due to the problem of hand-to-mouth, they are compelled to keep their children at home to assist in household work, which is responsible for the minimum presence of primary-level female students. According to the guardians, they are unemployed and lack income, which results in a lack of uniforms, admission fees, and stationary expenses. This is the reason behind their unwillingness to send their children to school.

Despite the girls' immense potential, the lack of a supportive environment combined with deeply rooted conservative socio-cultural norms continues to deny their right to education. It is the leading cause of the high dropout rate. "Women, the poor, lower caste people, and transgender have not achieved freedom in the true sense. Though they have witnessed some improvement in their social, financial, and political spheres, their condition remains problematized as they continue to be at the receiving ends, both in private and public spheres (Awasthi, 2022).

Options to Increase Girl Students' Continuity in Education

The study revealed that the limited continuity of primary-level girls in education arises from neglecting Karl Marx's principle of raising awareness to involve both advanced and disadvantaged girls in education. Additionally, it highlights the disregard for the national education policy, which emphasizes enrolling all students in the mainstream education system. Discussions were conducted among students, guardians, and teachers to address these issues and generate ideas for improving girls' educational continuity (Government of Nepal, 2020). Increasing the continuity of girls' education requires a many-sided approach addressing social, economic, cultural, and institutional barriers. One of them is that awareness of education for girls seems essential to less educated families and conservative societies. The more educated and aware the families are, the better the girls are encouraged and supported to continue their education.

The other way to promote the continuity of girls' education is to provide scholarships. According to the guardians and female students, continuity and attendance rates increase if the school provides scholarships and all required elements free of cost. The provision of scholarships, day lunches, educational tours, picnics, dances, music programs, and uniforms without cost is found to promote the continuity of girls' education.

The third option to promote the continuity of girls' education is the provision of female teachers. The girls were found to face several problems during school age. They could share their problems and bitter experiences more with female teachers than male teachers. Female teachers love them like mothers and conduct teaching activities that help girls ask questions without fear and hesitation. The female students responded positively to the researcher's question about the female teacher's arrival at the school.

Conclusion

The study explored the factors affecting girls' education in rural Nepal, focusing on barriers to continuity and identifying strategies to improve educational participation. Utilizing a mixed-method approach, the data were gathered from primary sources such as students and guardians and secondary sources, including government records and reports. The findings revealed that socio-cultural norms, economic barriers, and gender-based discrimination are the primary factors hindering girls' education. Girls are burdened with household responsibilities, expected to prioritize family obligations over schooling, and often subject to early marriage.

Despite free education policies, low-income families struggle to afford educational expenses, even for basic needs like uniforms and stationery. Additionally, gender stereotypes and parental preferences for sons exacerbate the disparities. The poor supportive school environment, including a small number of female teachers, further discourages girls from continuing formal education. Dropout rates remain alarmingly high due to these interconnected factors despite national and international efforts to promote girls' education. The findings align with previous studies highlighting entrenched socio-cultural beliefs and economic constraints as barriers to girls' education.

The study adds to the discourse by emphasizing the critical role of female teachers and targeted interventions such as scholarships, which were less discussed in earlier research. The efforts include awareness campaigns, economic support such as scholarships, free educational materials, and financial incentives; empowerment programs that involve girls in leadership and decision-making; female representation in schools to support and address their internal challenges; and policy enforcement to strengthen and monitor gender equality policies including punitive measures for violations that can address discrimination and early marriage issues have a significant role in improving girls' education.

The study concludes that the continuity of girls' education requires sustained efforts to address deeply rooted socio-cultural biases and economic inequities. Effective implementation of national policies and community-level interventions can pave the way for gender equity in education. Further research should focus on the studies that assess the long-term impact of these interventions and explore innovative methods to integrate girls into the education system sustainably.

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