

Structural Barriers to Girls' Education in Tarai Community of Nepal

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ABSTRACT

Nepal has made considerable progress in expanding access to education, supported by national policies and constitutional guarantees for free and compulsory basic education. Targeted initiatives also aim to reduce gender disparities and promote education for girls and marginalised groups. Despite these efforts, several factors including persistent gender norms, poverty, early marriage practices, household responsibilities, safety concerns, and inadequate infrastructure continue to limit girls' educational opportunities, particularly in rural and marginalised communities. This paper presents an assessment of the current educational status of girls, analysis of the multi-dimensional barriers to their schooling, and evaluation of the alignment between local government services and community perceptions. Using focus groups and key informant interviews in Gadhimai Municipality of Rautahat district, this study adopted a descriptive qualitative design to investigate the obstacles to girls' education. Results show that girls' participation in formal education is severely limited by cultural expectations, parental preferences for sons' education, household responsibilities, early marriage, and safety concerns. Although alternative learning opportunities are offered by community learning centers and vocational programmes, issues like discrimination, poor school administration, and household chores limit the participation of targeted groups. To guarantee equal educational opportunities and foster girls' personal development and empowerment, the paper argues for gender-sensitive policies, safer and more adaptable learning environments, and greater community support.

1. Introduction

The Constitution of Nepal (2015) guarantees free and compulsory education up to the basic level and free secondary education for all children within the country's borders, promoting inclusive access to quality

education (GoN, 2015). The 'Exploration of Education Statistics Provincial Perspectives' study, conducted by the National Campaign for Education Nepal, indicates that over 95 per cent of the school-aged children are enrolled in schools, with more than 70 per cent remaining in the classrooms until the end of the academic

year. Under the Local Government Operation Act 2074 (LGOA), twenty-three different education-related responsibilities have been handed over to the local level. These include making educational policies, rules, and standards for non-formal education, as well as for open, alternative, continuous learning, and community learning programmes. In addition, the LGOA gives local governments the responsibility to plan, implement, monitor, and evaluate education-related programmes in their municipalities (National Campaign for Education Nepal, 2021).

The Constitution also guarantees the right to equality, freedom from discrimination, and access to free basic education. In line with this Constitutional right, districts such as Bara and Rautahat in Madhesh Province have introduced education initiatives like the *Beti Bachao-Beti Padhao* (BBBP) campaign which was initiated in 2018 by the Chief Minister of Madhesh Province (back then Province 2). This programme was a locally initiated and has political backing that seeks to empower girls and women by eliminating discriminatory practices like sex-selective abortion, reducing child marriage and dropout rates among girls, and enhancing girls' education and employability in the workforce, thus eliminating discrimination against women (Samuels & Ghimire, 2021). Likewise, the federal government has adopted the Girls Inclusive Education Network (GIEN) to address barriers to girls' education in Nepal (PIN, 2020). The network has been established with the involvement of multi-stakeholders, including the government and private sectors, to advocate for the special needs of girls, children with disabilities, and marginalised groups to ensure they have equal access to learning opportunities. Both initiatives have been designed to ensure the continuation of their education.

The National Education Policy Nepal 2019 (Collegenp, 2019) advocates for equitable educational opportunities for all genders, especially targeting girls' education. The persistence of gender disparities in education is attributed to cultural norms, economic obstacles, and social bias. Consequently, the policy incorporates provisions aimed at improving girls' access to education, especially within rural and marginalised communities. These provisions encompass measures designed to ensure the safety of girls and mitigate dropout rates, including scholarship schemes, free education, and community sensitisation regarding the significance of girls' education. Furthermore, the policy mandates the development of gender-responsive curriculum and enhancement of teachers' capacities to identify gender specific challenges in education (Lal, 2025).

In addition, the policy proposes incentives and support systems to address specific barriers that hinder girls' enrollment in secondary and higher education. It underscores the role of local government in promoting gender equity in education, ensuring that educational institutions provide adequate support for boys and girls (My Republica, 2020). This emphasis on community involvement is critical for eliminating stereotypes that obstruct the education of girls, thereby facilitating social and economic development in Nepal. The Government of Nepal demonstrates its commitment to gender equality in education through various policies, notably the School Sector Development Plan (SSDP) and the Education for All (EFA) National Plan. These policies outline goals aimed to reduce gender gaps, eliminate gender-based violence, and ensure equal access to education at all levels, particularly for marginalised groups such as girls and children from rural areas (UKaid, 2024). Besides formal policies on education, a range of gender-responsive education programmes have been launched to promote girls' education. For instance, the Girls'

¹ The name *Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao* translates to 'Save the girl child, educate the girl child' (Samuels & Ghimire, 2021)

Education Network (GIEN) is being supported and owned by the Government of Nepal after successful trial from various education project in Tarai region of Nepal. Being a part of initiative of the local governments and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), this programme addresses critical issues to foster inclusive education, with particular attention to reducing bottlenecks faced by girls (UNICEF, 2023).

However, despite these progressive policies and programmes aimed at advancing girls' education, the reality on the ground - particularly in Madhesh province - reveals that a significant number of children remain out of school. Even with multimillion-dollar investments in education-related projects through various donor agencies, and government-owned initiatives like the BBBP, a substantial number of children, remain out of school (NCE, 2020). The result of a survey conducted by the Ministry of Education (2021) showed that 1,91,221 students in Madhesh province did not attend school. Out of them, 25,334 were of primary school-going age, and 1,35,877 were fit to be in secondary level. The same survey also showed that more girls were skipping school than boys. Figures from Madhesh province stand out even when they are compared with other provinces. Although this province is ahead of other provinces in terms of access to transportation, communication, education, and availability of infrastructure, children are still out of school citing various reasons like poverty, traditions, an unmatched teacher and student ratio in schools, and its infrastructure and child/early marriage (Bhattarai, 2018).

While Madhesh province continues to struggle with the high number of out-of-school children despite many policies and investments, Nepal has made notable progress in the education sector over the past decade through various countrywide initiatives. This progress has been driven by countrywide

initiatives such as the Education for All National Plan of Action (2000-2015), the School Sector Reform Programme (2009-2016) and the School Education Sector Plan (2022-2030). Nonetheless, it has been observed that not all social groups share these accomplishments equally; disparities in access, participation, and learning outcomes still exist, leaving some children behind. According to the Nepal Demographic and Health Survey 2016 (Ministry of Health, Nepal, New ERA, & ICF, 2017), the Equity Index 2018 indicates that Rautahat and Bara are among the lowest-ranked districts (red zones) in Madhesh Province in terms of development indicators, especially girls' education and life outcomes. The province has the highest illiteracy rate in the country (41%) and the highest proportion of females who have never attended school (58.7% of females compared to 32% of males). The province's net secondary-level attendance ratio for girls was the lowest among all provinces (42%).

Gender inequality and traditional practices have negatively affected educational attainment in the province, resulting in lower numeracy and literacy levels among adolescent girls. In addition, early marriage of girls continues to be practiced, even though parents are aware of the legal minimum age for marriage (The Center for Reproductive Rights & United Nations Population Fund, 2016). As a result, many girls are marrying at a very young age and quitting school early. According to the 2016 NDHS survey, Madhesh Province has an adolescent marriage rate of 23 per cent, and 18 per cent of girls aged 15–19 had already started childbearing both the highest figures among all provinces leading to early school dropout among girls. The same survey also found that the age difference between girls and their spouses was significant, which reduces girls' bargaining power with their husbands and in-laws and creates a barrier to achieving their educational and life goals. Gender inequality and discrimination against

women are prevalent in Nepal. Despite some progress in recent years, women and girls still face significant challenges in accessing their rights to education, health, and economic opportunities. The COVID-19 pandemic has made things worse for many people. Women and girls are facing risks of violence, losing their jobs, and juggling to receive essential service (Ministry of Health *et al.*, 2017).

These issues in Madhesh are part of a wider national challenge in ensuring access to education for all children. According to the National Statistics Office and Education Surveys carried out in the country, many children in the country remain out of school. Currently, there are 770,000 children in the country between the ages of 5 and 17 who are out of school, and this is an indication that there still exist challenges in accessing education in the country (UNICEF, 2023). According to the National Statistics Office, in terms of the different provinces in the country, the highest number of out-of-school children is in the Madhesh Province at 13.61 per cent. The least number of out-of-school children in the country is in the Gandaki Province at 1.02 per cent, while in the remaining provinces such as Karnali (2.56%), Sudurpaschim (2.51%), Koshi (2.86%), Lumbini (3.50%), and Bagmati (1.64%), the rates are relatively lower than in the Madhesh Province (National Statistics Office, 2023). Studies have shown that in the Lumbini Province, in districts such as Banke and Kapilvastu, a high number of school dropout cases have been observed. Currently, 17.9 per cent and 16.2 per cent of children in these districts aged between 5 and 17 years remain out of school (UNICEF & Global Action Nepal, 2024).

Limited access to education and persistent gender inequality has long-term implications for women's economic empowerment. With violence and discrimination, women in Nepal face significant barriers to economic empowerment. As reported by the World Bank

(2023), only 39 per cent of women aged 15-64 are part of the labor force, compared to 79 per cent of men. Women who are employed often find themselves in low-paying, informal jobs that offer limited opportunities for career advancement. Additionally, they also struggle to access credit and other financial services, limiting their ability to start or expand their businesses. This multifaceted disadvantage and challenges highlight the urgent need for ongoing efforts to promote gender equality and empower women in Nepal (International Labor Organization, 2026).

In response to these persistent challenges, recent developments indicate positive strides towards gender equality in the country. UN Women (2020) highlights the Government of Nepal's initiatives, including the 2016 National Strategy for Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality, which aims to address structural barriers faced by girls and women. Notably, women's representation in the national parliament has increased to 33 per cent, signaling progress in women's political participation and providing a foundation for advancing broader gender equality and empowerment goals.

Building on these policy initiatives, social protection measures and awareness campaigns aimed at addressing social barriers such as early marriage, gender-based violence, and discrimination that have significantly played their role in increasing school attendance for girls. This includes initiatives that raise awareness of safeguarding girls, and place mechanisms to resolve complaints to protect girls while at school. Collectively, these efforts lay a robust foundation for advancing educational opportunities for girls in Nepal. However, challenges persist, particularly in rural and marginalised communities. This study seeks to investigate the factors contributing to girls' exclusion from schooling, current status of girls' education, analysing its major barriers, perception of the community and local

government regarding girls' education and assess the gaps between the services provided by the local government for promoting girl's education as well as aims to evaluate government initiatives aimed at educating these girls and their associated success stories.

2. Methods and Materials

It employed a descriptive, qualitative approach and relied on both primary and secondary sources of data. Primary data were collected in Ward Number 5 of Gadhimai Municipality, Rautahat District using Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) methods. The participants were purposively selected. Secondary data were obtained from academic journals, research articles, news reports, government publications, and national and international reports on girls' education. The study conducted a total of seven consultations with key stakeholders to understand the challenges and opportunities for girls' education. Four Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were held with out-of-school married and unmarried girls, their parents, and male siblings, while three Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were conducted with the Municipal Education Official, Deputy Mayor, and a community leader. These consultations provided comprehensive insights into the barriers, community perceptions, and institutional factors affecting girls' education. KIIs helped validate findings from the girls and parents while providing insights into government-led interventions and overall educational conditions in the area. FGDs allowed participants to discuss barriers and enabling factors affecting girls' education and offered an understanding of parental perspectives and community norms.

This paper draws on the study that explored challenges related to girls' education, guided by a feminist theoretical framework as discussed below, to analyze gender-based issues influencing educational access and participation. Fieldwork was conducted

in Ward No. 8 of Gadhimai Municipality, Rautahat District, in August 2025. A qualitative analysis was conducted to make the study clear, achievable, and conclusive. Ethical considerations, ensuring informed consent, minimising harm, and protecting participant confidentiality throughout the study were prioritised. Furthermore, adherence to ethical principles was maintained by properly acknowledging all secondary data sources and upholding the integrity of the research process.

The development of a feminist theory on education try to elaborate on the mechanisms and causes for gender inequality in schools and colleges, and its consequences in society. Many educational systems today reflect existing inequalities in the opportunities for women, like other societal institutions (Brown-Weinstock, n.d.). Women traditionally dominated feminist theory: however, scholars of all genders have embraced it. In going beyond male-centered perspectives, feminist theorists have produced more inclusive and innovative social frameworks that challenges the assumption that the social actor is inherently male. This theory particularly highlights how various systems of power such as gender, race, class, sexuality, nationality, and disability intersect, offering deeper insight into social inequality (Chandrika, 2019). The feminism of today is more multicultural, acknowledging the varied needs and experiences of women shaped by diverse cultural and geopolitical factors. The relationship between Indian and Western feminism warrants reevaluation, as Western feminism often adheres to radical norms. Furthermore, societal structures tend to confine femininity within the domestic sphere, limiting women's participation in the public domain (Masterclass, 2022).

Liberal feminism is a branch of a feminist theory that focuses on the rights of women through legal and political context. It is rooted in liberalism, which advocates individual freedom, democracy, and equality. This perspective argues that women's

oppression stems from their lack of political and civil rights. Therefore, liberal feminism seeks to achieve equality between the sexes by advocating for equal rights, opportunities, and representation of women through changing legislation (Guy-Evans, 2024). The other strand, egalitarian liberal feminists advocate for strong government intervention to ensure women's autonomy and equal right of participation in democracy. They support anti-discrimination laws, affirmative action, welfare policies, and cultural climate to achieve equal representation of women in governance aligning with leftist political views. In contrast, classical liberal feminists focus on opposing gender-based distinctions in laws and believe these reforms have been accomplished in liberal societies like the United States. They support free-market economics and are against state intervention, including anti-discrimination laws and welfare programs positioning their views as right-wing. There are, however, classical-liberal feminists who do believe in cultural change to question gender roles but view these changes as non-political and reject using state power for cultural reform (Baehr, 2021).

3. Results and Discussion

The study employed group discussions and interviews with community-level and government-level stakeholders from the proposed community. Findings derived from these field-level consultations are presented below and are further supported by relevant secondary sources. The results are organised thematically and discussed in detail under each theme.

3.1 Household characteristics and its impact of girls education

Household income

During the group discussions, the author examined the occupation of the parents of girls. The discussions revealed that the income of the people in the study area is mainly derived from agricultural activities, daily wage work, and foreign employment. There

is a clear division of labor work among the people in the study area. Women and girls are mostly engaged in agricultural activities, whereas men are mostly engaged in daily wage outside the home. Men usually go out in the morning for work, whereas women manage both domestic work and agricultural activities after completing domestic work. In the same way, girls assist their mothers in domestic work as well as agricultural activities from an early age, whereas boys assist their family only after they reach the age of 15 years. In addition, the people in the study area prefer labor from within family members instead of hiring laborers from outside the family. In the same way, foreign employment is also a major source of income for the people in the study area.

Education status of household head

The group discussions focused on the key household characteristics, with primary focus on education status of household heads and how it affected attitudes towards girls' education. For instance, the participants noted that most of the household heads were literate, while a small percentage could not read and write. Despite this, there was a noted reluctance on the part of parents to allow their daughters to continue with their education beyond grade 8 or 9. This reluctance was attributed to the increase in the rate of elopement and relationships between girls and boys in the community, which prompted parents to take a cautious approach towards allowing adolescent girls to attend school. For the Muslim community, it was noted that formal education for girls was not prioritised, as it is believed that they can get the "necessary education" through attending a Madrasa² which focused on cultural

² A madrasa is an educational institution for Islamic studies, originating from the Arabic word *darasa* meaning "to study," where religious and cultural teachings based on the Holy Quran are traditionally preserved, and whose management has long concerned both public and private stakeholders due to the need to balance tradition with modern development (Kafle, 2015).

and religious knowledge. Moreover, it was considered sufficient and important for their expected roles as housewives. Therefore, there was no need for them to make progress in terms of their education. This, however, is applicable to this community and cannot be generalised in other situations.

During the consultations with municipal education officials, head teachers, and parents, it was found that the people in Rautahat district were facing difficulty making their ends meet. Only a few households within the Dalit and other marginalised communities experienced absolute poverty. To address financial scarcity, boys from these communities often engaged in economic activities from an early age. The head teacher noted that despite facing extreme poverty, some parents from these communities enrolled their children in school; however, the children did not remain enrolled for long. Since most parents were farmers, their children tended to drop out during the agricultural season to assist their parents with farming activities. The parents verified the findings, where many mothers of the girls stated that they were engaged in agriculture and worked in others' fields to sustain their livelihood, followed by their engagement on wage labor for their sustenance.

I am uneducated, so I could not get a job. As a result, I had to work in others' fields or as daily wage labor to support my household- Parent, Gadhimai

Proper shelter is a fundamental physiological need as outlined by Maslow's Hierarchy. When basic needs like food, clothing, shelter, and sleep are unmet, an individual struggles to focus on high-level needs like education and recreation. In many families, daily survival takes precedence over educational opportunities, particularly for girls, who are often seen as less important. As families shift from traditional mud or thatched roofs to more durable concrete roofs, they

are motivated to accomplish that as a matter of social prestige rather than sending girls to school.

Household chores

The consultations with girls indicated that they primarily oversee household chores like cleaning, cooking, and fetching water. Many girls stated that they had participated in CLCs classes organised by the Aarambha Project, where they learned diverse topics including schoolbook content, financial literacy, climate change, social norms etc. They also stated that they often must complete numerous chores before and after those classes. The girls also revealed that the workload is particularly burdensome for girls who are above 15 years.

The girls stated that the CLCs classes were nine months long. After completing the classes, they opted to continue with formal education and vocational training. Girls who chose formal education attended school, while those who selected vocational courses received various training programmes such as tailoring, beautician training, animal husbandry, and others. For girls who opted for school, they stated that they had to perform some of the household chores. On the other hand, girls who had transitioned to vocation classes had to perform larger part of the chores. Girls who transitioned to vocational training stated that balancing household responsibilities, jobs, and CLCs classes remained a constant challenge for them. For instance, one girl mentioned that her three sisters are also in the tailoring business, yet they all share the responsibilities of household chores despite having other members in the household.

"We have divided our household chores in such a way that everyone can work effectively both in their own tasks and in the household to support the family." - Muslim girl, Gadhimai

Though girls were bound to engage in household chores before and after CLCs

classes, in cases of married girls, they received support from their mother-in-law to take care of their children, which allowed them time for their studies. When asked about the duration of their engagement in household chores, most of them stated that they often engaged in chores for 3-4 hours a day. The duration of household chores was a determinant of the time girls could spend studying at home. As most of the girls were seen doing household chores for a few hours only, it can be inferred that these girls could utilise their time to study at home as well. As for the girls with longer working hours or those who were engaged in other work, such as tailoring, they might not have gotten the appropriate time and environment at home for study.

Additionally, consultation with girls and parents revealed that among the households that did not have land of their own, mothers worked as wage laborers in others' agricultural fields to generate income. On the other hand, in households with their own land, girls often complete household chores before joining their parents in the field for certain durations such as the plantation and harvesting seasons. Nevertheless, it is important to note that all children above the age of 15 were often obliged to work alongside their parents in the field during the plantation and harvesting season.

Dowry

The dowry system has been a significant barrier to girls' education and often leads to early marriage in certain part of Nepal, especially Tarai. Discussions with various community members showed that giving and receiving dowries is commonly accepted in the Tarai region. Parents and girls mentioned that marrying girls off at a young age is seen as beneficial, as it requires offering of less amount of dowry. This mindset makes early marriage a way for families to manage their finances, but it prevents girls from getting a proper education. Additionally, mothers expressed worries that

their community will start to criticise girls if they don't get married early, adding pressure to marry at a young age.

During the consultations, it was revealed that parents were willing to sell their assets to pay for dowry but were not willing to do the same for their daughter's education. During a discussion with the municipal education official in Rautahat, he noted that...

"The Dowry system is also a problem in society. When the girls are more educated, parents are supposed to give more dowry during their marriage. – Municipal official – Gadhimai

Parents felt obligated to give dowry because they feared their daughters would be mistreated by their in-laws for not bringing one. Families from both ethnic groups (Muslim and non-Muslim) agreed that even though it was hard to manage expenses and save money for dowry, they still felt they had to do it. This cultural practice was deeply ingrained in society, and people had become accustomed to it. Thus, when it was their turn to receive dowry, they did not refuse it either.

"We have a daughter, and at one point in time, she should get married. You know, we have a culture of giving dowry as well. We must give the same amount of dowry to her in-laws when she gets married. So, to be prepared for the future and minimise the economic burden, we cannot deny the gift of today. – Parent Gadhimai

Despite parents tending to marry off their daughters at an early age, it was also found that the rate of child marriage has decreased as compared to the past. According to the Mayor and the Education official of Gadhimai, ever since the local government passed the provision stating girls who give birth to a baby before they turn 18 years old, their babies

will not get the birth certificate, parents have become reluctant to marry off their daughters at an early age. However, the case of elopement is still prevailing despite having various laws and prosecutions against it. Additionally, some of the cases of early marriage were also conducted defying existing law. For those who defy the law, Palika has a provision of punishment that includes a few months of imprisonment and a fine of some amount. Despite having various laws, prosecutions, and strong punishments, some of the parents still practice early marriage ignoring prevailing laws and prosecutions. As a result, other parents were also encouraged to some extent.

3.2 Parental attitude and engagement in girl's lives

As girls mature, parental concerns about their safety, particularly during physical changes, increase. The report by People in Need showed that 27.4 per cent of girls aged 10-14 and 58.7 per cent of girls aged 15-19 lacked parental support for training programmes. Older girls faced restrictions due to safety concerns and potential family shame. The same report also revealed parental attitude about their girls specifically regarding their girls' ability to be able to start up their own business where majority of parents perceive girls as incapable of sound decision making. Hence, 12.6 per cent of younger-aged and 29.3 per cent of older-aged girls were discouraged from starting their business.

This study examined parental perception regarding education and training of their girls. The findings revealed that, while many parents supported their daughters or daughter-in-law in pursuing training or starting some home-based business, they were often reluctant to send their daughters/ daughter-in-law to formal education. For girls under 14 years old, parents expressed several concerns such as poor school management, long travel distances, safety issues, financial constraints, and a lack

of interest from their daughters as barriers to sending them to school, despite understanding the benefits of education. Parents were reluctant to send girls aged 15-19, who were married but were waiting for the *Gauna*³ ceremony to attend school. They worried about potential negative perceptions from boys that could affect their daughters' future marriages. The study found that the decision-making power for married girls often lay with their in-laws or husbands rather than with their own parents. In some instances, particularly among Muslim families, there is a belief that girls do not need formal schooling and that education from a Madrasa is sufficient. These parents argue that since girls usually get married and take care of household responsibilities, spending money on their education is unnecessary; instead, they prefer to save for their dowries.

While the parents were willing to send their younger girls to the schools, most parents expressed openness to allowing their daughter and daughter-in-law to participate in skill-based programmes. However, they preferred these programmes to be nearby as they do not feel comfortable sending their girls away due to safety concerns. They stated that in the past, many mothers used to wait outside the training halls to ensure their daughters return home safely. When it comes to supporting business initiatives, parents showed moderate encouragement. They were willing to take on more household duties to give their daughters time to focus on starting their own businesses. In cases where married girls had children, parents expressed their readiness to help with childcare and household tasks, understanding the potential income their daughters could generate.

³ *Gauna is a traditional Hindu custom associated with the consummation of marriage, associated with the custom of child marriage. The ceremony takes place several years after marriage. Before the ceremony, the bride stays at her natal home, marriage is considered only as a ritual union and conjugal life begins only after Gauna (Chawla, 2002).*

Overall, parents displayed moderate support for their daughter's education and future. While they understand the importance of education, traditional beliefs, and societal expectations often restrict their actions. Despite the challenges, some parents have started to allow their daughters to attend schools and training programmes that do not require any financial investment. However, ongoing societal issues—such as elopement of underage girls, gender-based violence, and concerns about family reputation—continue to create significant barriers to girls' educational opportunities.

"When our daughters are educated, they can understand right and wrong. That is why I am sending my daughter-in-law to CLCs classes. Right now, they need our permission, but once they are educated, they can differentiate right and wrong and we can trust their choices." - Parent

3.3 Safety concerns and restrictions on mobility

With regards to the safety concerns among parents to send girls beyond the household or community, a considerable number of parents stated that they had safety concerns for girls while traveling to and from school. Amongst them, many parents mentioned that the distance between the school and their house was the only safety concern for parents like them. Parents feared the unforeseen circumstances that might arise once the girl leave the house like elopement or physical assaults.

"Our daughters can travel from home to school and are safe while traveling. But I do not know what is inside the school. In school, teachers should pay attention to safety. If they ensure the safety of our daughters, we can send them to school without fear" - Mother Gahdimai

Besides the safety concern on the way to and from school, parents are very concerned about things taking place within the school premises such as discrimination based on ethnicity by the teachers, harassment by teachers, and bullying among students. One girl consulted in Gahdimai shared that she and some friends faced harassment from teachers due to their Muslim identity, which ultimately led them to drop out of school.

"The teachers treat Muslim and other caste students differently, so I dropped out from the school and don't want to go anymore." – Muslim girl – Gahdimai

3.4 Gender disparity

Gender disparity significantly limited girls' education in the Tarai region of Nepal. During discussions with parents and girls, many expressed that there was no gender discrimination within their families. However, when asked about education, most girls reported that their male siblings attended private schools or studied in cities, while they themselves were often denied the opportunity to attend public schools, Madrasas, or other informal educational settings. When this imbalance was highlighted, many girls indicated that their families could not afford to send them to school. Parents clearly favored boys, while girls accepted this unequal treatment as normal.

Even though parents acknowledged the importance of educating girls, they still chose to invest in their sons' education. This preference stemmed from the belief that sons would be the primary earners and provide support in old age, whereas daughters would eventually marry into other families. Consequently, girls were trained in household chores, which were deemed essential for becoming good daughters-in-law. As a result, girls bore the responsibility for household duties, and when the eldest sister married, these responsibilities shifted to the younger sisters, leaving male siblings out of

the equation. Many girls often dropped out of school or community learning centers (CLCs) when their older sisters got married, as they struggled to balance household chores with their education.

“In our religious books, it was mentioned that sons should not do household work and daughters should not study.” – Muslim girl

When discussing with the girls, it became clear that none of their brothers participated in household work, while the girls felt responsible for all these tasks. They often attributed their role to fate, stating,

“Girls believed that doing household chores was their destiny and must continue doing so throughout their lives.”

“A son should not perform household chores. We have daughters in the household for this.” – Mother

The discussions with government officials and head teachers revealed that societal norms and the social system tended to favor boys. A significant example of this bias was that boys were often sent to private schools, while girls were, in several cases, not even enrolled in public schools. A common observation was that parents felt comfortable allowing boys to travel alone or stay out of home till late. In contrast, girls were rarely allowed to leave the community by themselves. One girl noted that her parents restricted her mobility due to safety concerns and the fear of societal judgment regarding her character. As a result, her parents preferred to either get what she needed from the market themselves or accompany her, never allowing her to go out alone. This information was also supported by the change champions and facilitators during the discussions.

3.5 Poor school management and motivation to girls

The secondary resources showed that many schools of Nepal do not have school management committees. The scenario was the same in the visited municipality. When asked for the reason for not having SMC (School Management Committee), the head teachers stated that the political instability of the local government was the major reason for not formulating SMC. Similarly, they also stated that political interference in the education sector was very high in the whole district. In the schools visited, there was no School Improvement Plan (SIP) available. According to the head teacher, the trend of duplicating SIP from cybercafé, online source, was commonly reported. He stated that when duplicating the document, they just renamed the name of the school while others were kept as it is. As a result of that, the need for one school does not match the need for another school.

The findings revealed that girls lost interest in going to school. This was common among girls who had dropped out of school at some point. Their previous experience of going to school entailed being bullied by classmates, teachers and corporal punishment that discouraged them from re-joining school to some extent. Most of the girls stated that they faced ethnic discrimination as well as being mistreated by teachers purely based on their ethnicity. In addition, teachers either spent time gossiping among themselves or were absent. Under such circumstances, girls and parents felt it would be better if the girls discontinued going to school. As for the married girls and those waiting for *Gauna*, they were so conscious about their physical appearance that they no longer had the confidence to go back to class. This was worsened by teasing and bullying by classmates specially males.

3.6 Impact of household chores on learning

The consultations revealed that younger girls often have a sister-in-law who takes on more household responsibilities, allowing them time to focus on their studies. Research indicates that girls engaged in longer hours of household chores tend to perform better in English, likely because these are older girls who have exited the formal education system and have a relative advantage in language comprehension compared to younger girls learning a foreign language for the first time.

However, household chores negatively impacted on the education of many girls, as not all benefit from learning at home. They typically engage in chores from early morning, leaving little time for homework. While some girls do have studying time at home, they often do not utilise it effectively. Girls from poorer households show better proficiency in Nepali and Math than in English, as they find these subjects easier and are already practicing Math in everyday life.

The performance of girls from poorer households remains lower compared to their peers from households with higher socioeconomic status due to the extensive time spent on chores and irregular income sources that require them to contribute significantly at home. Although girls participate in various activities, including attending CLCs, taking care of younger siblings, and engaging in vocational training, their educational engagement is often limited.

Muslim girls often attend Madrasa for Urdu language study before CLCs some going on to work in family-operated tailoring shops afterward, indicating that their primary motivation for education is to enhance their vocational skills. In contrast, non-Muslim girls reported limited significant activities outside of chores.

Parents expressed willingness to send their daughters under 15 to formal education after CLCs, preferring quality education. However, girls aged 10–14 who have dropped out of school are often hesitant to return due to negative past experiences in formal education.

“Teachers keep gossiping with each other rather than teaching us. There is no point in going to school.” – Girl Respondent

The older group of girls aged 15-19 faced barriers to formal education. Many parents are reluctant to send their daughters to school, and the girls themselves often lack interest in continuing their education. Factors contributing to this situation include early marriages, which make some girls feel out of place among their peers, and the need for permission from in-laws to attend school, a request that is frequently denied. Additionally, long distances to schools raise safety concerns for parents. Instead of pursuing formal education, families are more inclined to support vocational training, such as tailoring, which is socially acceptable and provides girls with skills to earn money and gain financial independence before marriage.

During the consultation with girls and their parents regarding future aspirations, it was noted that many girls did not have clear plans beyond school or vocational training in tailoring. Married girls and those awaiting Gauna show awareness of vocational training options, while girls aged 15-19 can also re-enroll in school. Ultimately, decisions about vocational training often rest with parents or in-laws, highlighting the challenges posed by conservative perspectives on education and financial independence for girls.

“Parents are skeptical to invest in the education of girls because when girls are given the freedom, they misuse it and elope with a boy from another ethnicity, humiliating parents’ prestige.” – Parent Gadhimai

3.7 Girls' role in decision making

The findings indicate that girls have limited freedom in decision-making. Many girls reported that they need their parents' permission to perform simple tasks like going to the market or visiting friends. Major decisions, including marriage and education, are typically made by their fathers or grandfathers. Married girls mentioned that they must seek permission from their husbands and in-laws for everyday activities. Parents confirmed these findings and expressed their reluctance to allow their daughters to make decisions, believing that girls are too young and lack the skills needed for sound decision-making. To protect their family's reputation, parents take control of decisions on behalf of their daughters.

From the previous discussion, older male family members usually make household and financial decisions. If there are no men present, the mother-in-law takes charge. Additionally, older women often have more power over younger females, which impacts decision-making. For example, younger girls need permission from their mothers or mothers-in-law to cook, and daughters and daughters-in-law are expected to manage household chores and stay at home. Traditional gender roles are a significant issue in these areas. Conversations with girls and their families revealed that society often limits girls to household tasks while boys are not expected to take on similar responsibilities. Girls grow up being prepared for domestic roles and are seen as individuals who will leave the household after marriage. In contrast, boys receive special treatment because they are seen as future financial providers for the family.

3.8 Perception of parents towards proper age of marriage

The findings indicated that while parents were aware of the legal age for marriage and tended

to arrange marriages for their daughters at a later age, they still agreed to early marriages if they found a suitable match. Additionally, many parents experienced social and cultural pressures, along with concerns about the risk of their daughters eloping if they remained unmarried for too long.

Furthermore, one of the less obvious reasons for marrying daughters off early was linked to poverty. For families with limited resources, marrying off their daughters sooner meant one fewer person to support financially. Many parents in the areas involved in the study believed that marrying their daughters at a younger age also reduced the amount of dowry they needed to pay. The expectation was that as a girl got older, the dowry amounts typically increased.

"If the daughters are not given anything after getting married, their in-laws will beat them, harass them, and do violence. There are so many cases that you might have heard in social media and news as well. – Parent Gadhimai

3.9 Willingness of parents to support girls for their future

The parents consulted shared mixed opinions about supporting girls' education and their future. Some parents favored sending younger girls to school while restricting older girls to vocational training. Conversely, many parents, particularly from the Muslim community, held traditional beliefs that keep girls confined to household roles. They expressed that sending girls to formal school contradicts their cultural norms, resulting in limited educational opportunities for girls.

In the non-Muslim community, parents often attributed their decision not to send daughters to school to poverty. As previously discussed, parents from both communities showed willingness to support their daughters'

education only if external financial assistance was available. Additionally, the distance to the school posed a significant barrier. Parents were open to sending girls to nearby primary schools, but they hesitated when it came to higher education due to safety concerns and the risk of their daughters becoming involved with boys.

Some parents who were waiting for their daughters to go through *Gauna* expressed doubts about sending them to school, fearing potential dangers and the possibility of early love relationships. Furthermore, education officials and headteachers in the area noted that traditional beliefs still dominate the mindset of many families, favoring boys over girls when it comes to education. Boys are often sent to private schools, while girls struggle to gain access to public schools. The Assistant Municipal Education Officer of Gadhimai Municipality highlighted the high dropout rates in the community, attributing this to cultural expectations and household responsibilities. Even families with sufficient financial resources seem to prefer sending their daughters to Madrassa rather than formal schools.

The issue of child marriage in marginalised communities, such as the Dom, also significantly impacted girls' educational opportunities. Additionally, some teenagers themselves initiate marriages, further complicating the situation. Even when parents agree to delay marriage, many young girls choose to marry early.

The head-teacher corroborated these findings, mentioning that both girls and boys experience dropout rates. While early marriages limit educational opportunities for girls, boys often leave school to support their families financially. Girls who do attend school often manage household chores alongside their studies, which negatively affects their learning. Despite these challenges, the enrollment of girls tends to be higher than that of boys in

schools. Interestingly, some girls continue their education even after marriage, serving as role models for other girls.

Additionally, the Municipal Education Official pointed out that scholarship programmes are available for higher education. However, despite these opportunities, none of the students have taken advantage of this support.

"The municipality has scholarship programme for girls, especially those with disabilities, to help them continue their studies. It covers half the fees for medical studies like MBBS or BDS courses and the full fees for LLB courses. Although no one has used these scholarships yet, the municipality is willing to help if girls are interested."

- Municipal Education Official

The path to achieving educational goals and life dreams for girls is still filled with difficulties, even though parents have diverse reactions. Deep-rooted cultural beliefs, strict gender roles, and widespread poverty make it hard for girls to get an education.

4. Conclusion

This paper explores the complex barriers and opportunities that impact girls' education in Gadhimai Municipality in Rautahat District, with a focus on the larger Tarai region in Nepal. The findings highlight that the issue of girls' educational engagement is a complex one and is influenced by a combination of economic challenges, gender dynamics, and socio-cultural factors. The economy of most households in this region is agrarian-based and depends on labor migration and remittances. This economy heavily relies on family labor and engages girls in domestic and economic activities at a young age.

Despite slightly higher rates of literacy among the heads of the households, the attitudes

of the parents towards the education of their girls remain limited due to concerns about their safety, social status, and cultural considerations. Marriage at a young age, the dowry system, and *Gauna* continue to perpetuate gender inequality and affect the education of the girls. Although the attitudes of the parents towards the education of their girls are changing with regards to skill-based training and income generation activities, the education of the girls themselves is not given the value it deserves. Institutional barriers also play a significant role in the education of the girls. Poor management of the schools, political pressure on the teachers, experiences of discrimination and harassment of the girls at school, limit the motivation of the girls to continue their education. Moreover, the restrictions imposed on the movements of the girls and their limited freedom to make decisions also limit their agency to make choices regarding their education. Although the Community Learning Centers (CLCs) initiative is a positive step towards providing alternative learning centers to the girls, gender norms remain the same.

Overall, while the changes in the perceptions of the parents and policy provisions suggest the potential for positive developments, the socio-cultural norms, economic conditions, and safety concerns continue to be barriers to the education and empowerment of the girl child. However, to overcome these barriers, a comprehensive approach is necessary to ensure the integration of community awareness, gender transformation, good governance of the schools, and institutional support to create an enabling environment to allow the girl child to pursue education and attain socio-economic empowerment.

Based on the study findings, the recommendation is as follows: Firstly, integrated efforts should be made to ensure the access of girls to education through the removal of structural as well as socio-cultural barriers to their education. Second, community awareness

activities should be enhanced to transform traditional norms, early marriage, as well as dowry culture, which hinders the education of girls. Third, the provision of a secure and gender-sensitive learning environment through enhanced monitoring, teacher training, as well as effective management of learning institutions is a necessity. Finally, local authorities as well as other stakeholders should continue to support the girls moving from Community Learning Centers (CLCs) to formal education or other learning tracks.

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