

Empowering Adolescent Girls in Rural Nepal

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OVERVIEW

Nepal has made some progress in enrolling girls in school, but retention and success are still big issues. Many girls from rural schools either drop out or fall behind in their studies when they reach high school. Some of the key barriers include: lack of information about body change and menstruation hygiene and management; absence of private and clean facilities in school; heavy workload at home; early marriage; and parents' ignorance about the value of education for their girls.

In order to empower the adolescent girls from rural Nepal, a team of teachers, gender experts, physicians, nurses, and social workers implemented a 40-hour pilot training program with a focus on:

- Demystifying menstruation and physical changes.
- Suggesting ways girls can better manage their household chores and studies.
- Encouraging girls to assume leadership roles at school and in the community.
- Meeting with parents, teachers, and community members to discuss the problems girls face and to create an enabling environment for girls to study, attend, and stay in school.

Post-training feedback and a follow-up study suggest that the training was successful in bringing about some visible changes that include:

- Improved parental attitudes towards menstruation and parents' supportive behavior.
- Enhanced study skills among girls.
- Improved sanitation facilities in schools.
- Increased interest among girls to take leadership roles in school and community activities.

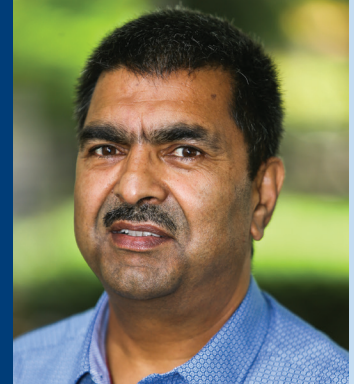
This research, which takes stock of the pilot experiences and the global literature on girls' empowerment programs, proposes to scale up the program by:

1. Integrating adolescent changes and their management in the formal education curriculum and textbooks.
2. Including gender responsive pedagogy in the in-service and pre-service teacher training programs.
3. Expanding the training program to the other districts with the additional elements of English language and information technology support.

Finally, the report emphasizes the need to form a broader alliance among girls' education stakeholders so that the allocated resources can be best utilized through mutual sharing and collaborative initiatives.

Empowering Adolescent Girls in Rural Nepal

Ganga Gautam



Girls' Education in Nepal

Although more children in Nepal have enrolled in schools in the past few years, nearly 1 million children from 5 to 12 years of age are still not in school (UNICEF 2016): Some have never been enrolled while others drop out; and, the number of those who leave permanently increases as the children age. For example, of those who are 10 to 14 years old, nearly 90 percent are in school, but among those 15 to 19, the figure drops to 70 percent. After that, only 29 percent of those from 20 to 24 years old are in college (Central Bureau of Statistics 2014).

Girls drop out in greater numbers

Government and other studies show that girls in Nepal do particularly poorly in all subjects at secondary level (Mathema and Bista 2006): While enrollment of rural girls and boys is similar in grades 5 to 7 (slightly more than half the total in this age group are in school), the numbers drop sharply when they reach grades 9 and 10, to 47 percent of boys and nearly 41 percent of girls. Based on national data, many rural girls drop out before they reach secondary level¹ (grades 9 and 10). In remote areas, a UNICEF/Population Council study (Amin, Bajracharya, Chau and Puri 2014) found girls' drop-out rates were even higher. As the figures below

indicate, the rate of out-of-school girls is higher across the age group of 11 to 17.

Further, girls who reach grade 10 do not compete well or pass the school leaving certificate exams. This is not because girls are less intelligent, but due to substantial barriers.

In the same manner, at the national level, girls and boys achieve similar grades through grade 8, but by grades 9 and 10, the girls' scores drop (EDSC, 2011). Also, by grade 10, many girls fail their exams and are not promoted to the next grade (ERO, 2013): Of girls in public schools, only about 20 percent pass the 10th grade national exam. In rural areas, the numbers are even worse, which is problematic, since 84 percent of Nepal's adolescents live in rural areas. Of these, girls' exam scores and pass rates in every subject are lower than boys (Mathema and Bista 2006).

Consequences of dropping out

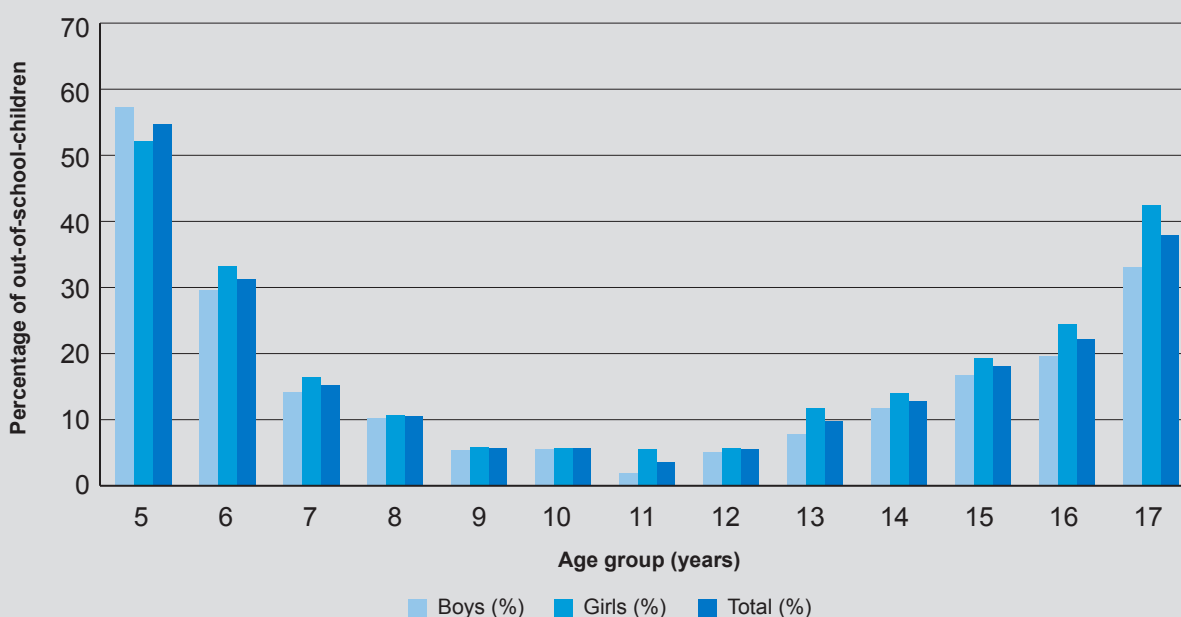
The consequences of such a high failure rate in grade 10 are huge. When girls leave school or fail the secondary school exams, they marry at an early age or migrate to cities to find employment; and, with low or no education, they are limited to informal sector, low-wage jobs, and are easily exploited and abused by employers.

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Although Mr. Gautam's focus has been primarily English language instruction and teacher training, his passion for girls' education motivated him to develop and implement a girls' empowerment program that reached 75 girls in 15 schools in three remote districts in Nepal. Mr. Gautam holds a B.Ed., an M.Ed., and an M.A. of English Language Teaching. He has collaborated with the U.S. Embassy, British Council, the Nepalese Ministry of Education, the Nepal English Language Teachers' Association (NELTA), among others, in education and on a women and girls' empowerment program in rural Nepal.

Figure 1: Out-of-School Children by Age Group and Gender



Source: MICS 2014

Further, several studies found that girls with little education are forced into the sex trade through *dohori* (duet) restaurants, dance bars, and massage parlors—not only in Nepal, but also in India, the Gulf countries and beyond (Terre des Hommes 2010; Maiti Nepal 2010; and Shakti Samuha 2008, as cited in Acharya 2014).

Reasons for dropping out

The reasons for dropping out in rural Nepal include economic problems (32 percent), family problems (27 percent), and parents unwilling to send their daughters to school (25 percent) (MOHP 2012). This is not surprising, since nearly 42 percent of the population lives below the poverty line² and even though public school fees are free, parents must cover the cost of supplies such as paper materials, uniforms, and exam fees. Also, girls are needed at home to do household chores. Moreover, since Nepal is a patriarchal society, many poor rural parents do not see girls' education as a priority. In fact, traditional social and cultural norms still affect girls' education, even where government laws or policies have been developed to change them.

Implications of Low Levels of Girls' Education

Women who only obtain a low level of education have greatly reduced opportunities. Although Nepal's recently promulgated constitution requires that women should account for 33 percent of employees in government offices, in the parliament, local elected bodies, and the formal employment sector, the actual number is far lower. For example, at present, only three of 31 ministers are women³ and of the 164 political parties registered in the election commission,⁴ only four have women as chairs (and these are not the major parties); of the current 20 supreme court judges,⁵ only three are women. Of the total number of civil servants, only 15.3 percent are female,⁶ with a relatively higher proportion in low ranking positions (GON/UNDP 2014). And only 14 percent of secondary school teachers are female (DOE, 2014).

These low numbers are due to both a patriarchal mindset and a male-dominant hierarchical structure. Also, women do not have secondary education certificates, which are required in higher education and the formal job market. Such negligible representation in the state mechanism and decisionmaking bodies threatens gender equity expectations.

Table 1: Percentage of women in decision-making bodies and the formal sector

Sector	Percentage of women
Cabinet Ministers	9 percent
Heads of the Political Parties (164 Parties)	2 percent
Supreme Court Judges (Out of 20)	15 percent
Civil Servants	15.3 percent
Secondary School Teachers	14 percent

Barriers to Girls' Education in Nepal

In addition to the economic, social, and cultural problems that prevent children from completing schools, girls face particular challenges (Acharya 2014; AWN 2012; Adhikari 2013; Bista 2004; MoHP 2012; Amin, Bajracharya, Chau and Puri 2014; UNICEF 2016). These include barriers linked to their biological changes—such as coping with menstrual periods without the materials they need in the schools, social and family values about menstruation, few female teachers to advise them, and pressure to marry at an early age, along with pressure to assume many household chores, which means less time to study and attend school.

Menstruation-related problems

Social and religious values about menstruation and the many restrictions they impose are serious problems for many young girls in rural Nepal.

Overall, such practices deny women and girls the freedom to participate in family and community activities and events (UNRHC, 2011). In a recent UNICEF study in rural areas, 95 percent of the girls sampled said they were restricted during their menstrual periods.

A recent newspaper article⁷ described the situation of a 24-year-old mother of three children who had to sleep in a neighbor's dark cowshed for five days. Although her family had its own shed, she was not allowed to use it because the community thought the

gods would have cursed her, her family, and community with bad luck on eve of their religious event.

In some communities, girls must stay in a separate house or a neighbor's house for five days during her first menstrual period. After that, girls can stay at home but cannot go to the kitchen or prayer room. Also, girls are not allowed to share the dining space with other family members. Regarding school, restrictions vary in each family and community. Some allow girls to attend, while others do not. Thus, the girls who are forced to strictly observe these customs can miss up to five school days a month.

Some girls stay home because they do not have access to sanitary pads or because they have pain accompanying their periods (AWN 2012).⁸ Moreover, they have little information about these physical changes. Even discussing menstrual periods is problematic, since the subject is still a taboo. According to a 2012 AWN study, girls were not told this happens naturally. Because poor families cannot afford commercial sanitary pads, most use strips of cloth made from old clothes. Nationally “85 percent of girls reported they use cotton cloth to manage their bleeding and don't have access to commercial sanitary products” (Amin, Bajracharya, Chau and Puri 2014). Also, since many lack information about hygiene, they are vulnerable to infections (although the exact number is unknown). Further, they are not able to wash the cloths they use as frequently as needed, given the lack of private space. Thus, they wash them at night, secretly, and hang them where no one can see them. Some do not even find the time to do this.

All these problems cause girls to miss school, which affects their classroom performance and ultimately, test scores.

It should be noted that in urban areas, where girls usually have access to commercially produced sanitary products, their attendance is not affected (Oster and Thornton, 2011).⁹

Gender-responsive facilities

The lack of separate or functioning toilets in schools is also a huge problem, particularly for girls (Bista 2004).

Although the government has made building them a priority, 20 percent have none and 31 percent do not have separate ones for girls (DOE 2013).

Indeed, as a research consultant for many development organizations, this author visited about 150 rural schools in the last two years and saw many toilets. Most were dirty, had no water, and girls said it was difficult to use them. Girls also said they do not want to come to school when they have their periods because there is no private space. One school principal noted in a local newspaper that almost all school dropouts were girls, and that they mainly leave after the eighth grade, often because of their physical changes, and because the schools lack proper sanitation facilities.¹⁰

Interestingly, most schools have a separate toilet that is only for teachers and visitors, labeled *staff toilet*. Usually it is kept locked, and the key in the staff room. If a visitor wants to use the students' toilet (if there is one), teachers say it is dirty and not usable. Thus, the staff are aware of the dirty conditions, but not all seem to have tried to fix the problem.

The problem was exacerbated by the massive 2015 earthquake which destroyed over 5,000 schools and damaged thousands of others in 56 districts. As a result, schools are now in temporary learning centers where toilets and water are rare. Thus, it is difficult to retain girls in secondary schools in these areas (Ministry of Education 2015).

Few female teachers in secondary schools

When girls have issues related to their health—particularly about body changes and menstruation—they often need to share them with someone in school, because, as mentioned above, the subjects are taboo, at home. Not surprisingly, girls prefer to share them with female teachers. However, females represent only 32 percent of teachers: 38 percent in primary schools, 21 percent in lower secondary schools and only 14 percent at the secondary level (DOE 2014), because few women have the bachelors' degree they need to teach at this level (many girls drop out school before they obtain it).

In addition, girls often face abusive behavior or harassment from male teachers and boys particularly during menstruation. Girls often do not report such behavior to the school administration, since they fear they will be humiliated further. Ultimately, they drop out (Adhikari 2013). Again, there is no female teacher with whom they can share these problems.

Some conservative parents feel insecure sending adolescent daughters to schools without female teachers and pull them out when they reach secondary level (Bista 2004).

Household chores

Adolescent girls are considered essential members of the family workforce in rural Nepal. Helping in the kitchen, collecting grass for cattle and firewood, fetching water, tending young siblings, and washing dishes and clothes are daily tasks. They also do farm work during the planting and harvesting seasons. Boys, on the other hand, are often excused from these tasks and are allowed to attend school. Such discrimination is common in many rural communities.

Given the heavy workload and the parents' discriminatory mindset, girls miss many days of school and even their exams. They also find it difficult to complete homework, which sometimes leads to physical punishment and humiliation in class (Santhya, et al. 2014). Similarly, girls are expected to help with community events such as cooking food and washing dishes (Amin, Bajracharya, Chau and Puri 2014). For some girls, the heavy workload and increased study pressure (once they reach secondary school), may cause stress, and depression, which seriously affects their performance. Thus, they leave school or fail their exams.

Early marriage

Early marriages also remove young girls from school and have serious physical, social, and emotional consequences (King and Winthrop 2015). This is a widespread problem in Nepal particularly among the excluded castes and marginalized communities (CARE 2016). Some parents are anxious to find husbands for their daughters when they reach puberty (with their first menstrual period). This is met by little resistance from girls as it is viewed as a cultural norm and a sign

of adulthood. UNICEF Nepal finds that child marriage is a common barrier to girls' education in all eight South Asian countries, and ranks Nepal the third highest. It says "girls married before the age of 18 are less likely to go to school and complete their education, and one in four married adolescent girls are already mothers or pregnant."¹¹

Further, many parents view girls' educations as a bad investment, since daughters typically live at their husbands' houses. "Why invest in a resource that will soon be someone else's?" is the common attitude in most communities (Bista 2004).

Early marriages also affect a families' finances: Since household income is under or at the poverty line, parents remove their daughters from schools and pressure them to get married, which rids the family of its financial obligations (Acharya 2007). This occurs more often in the lowest income families and indigenous communities where parents' education is low (Plan Nepal, Save the Children and World Vision International Nepal 2012). In a remote school in Bajhang, 10 girls out of 60 in grade 10 were married;¹² in fact, some girls were forced to marry even in grade five. Girls who are married said it was extremely difficult to attend school and manage a home and most think they will not do well on their exams. Early marriage also leads to early pregnancies, which minimises their chance of returning to schools.

Girls' Education and Empowerment Initiatives

Both the government and nongovernment sector want to provide equitable access to education. The government has prioritized girls' education in its policies and programs and is trying to attract girls to school by providing them with free textbooks, scholarships (although there are not nearly enough), and school uniforms. Also, many development agencies run programs for girls' education and empowerment. These include the Room to Read's girls' education and empowerment program; CARE Nepal's women's and girls' empowerment programs that focus on economic, socio-political, and cultural issues; Save The

Children's education, child protection and health programs; Plan Nepal's education and health programs; Action Aid's education and women's rights programs; Equal Access's women's and girls' empowerment programs, and UNICEF's girls education and adolescent development programs. Other organizations that have included women in their development agenda include U.S. Agency for International Development, The Asia Foundation, National Democratic Institute, International Alert, Action Contre La Faim, Aide et Action International Nepal, Center for Reproductive Rights, FN-Nepal, Ipas, IsraAid, Oxfam GB, Plante Enfants Nepal, Stichting Veldwerk—the Netherlands and Terre des Hommes Netherlands.¹³

Despite government and nongovernmental organization (NGO) efforts to promote girls' access to school and help them remain there, there are still high dropout rates. This means the barriers persist. Although these programs address some economic and social issues to some extent, there are a much wider set of barriers (and even free schools are not sufficient, since poor families must still cover many costs, as mentioned earlier).

Similarly, structural inequalities exist in the households, and girls and women still do not make decisions about their own lives. Unless girls see the importance of education, build self-esteem, and assume leadership positions in their family and the community, their lives will not improve. Thus, it is important to focus on empowering girls (World Bank Group 2014). Once this develops, they can begin to change archaic traditions, such as child marriage (Plan Nepal, Save the Children and World Vision International Nepal 2012).

To create an enabling environment at home and school, parents and teachers first need to understand the barriers and provide girls with the necessary support. Currently, they do not treat girls and boys equally, balance the workload among the family members, give extra support during exams, or engage girls in household discussions. For their part, schools could provide sanitary supplies, build separate toilets, teach about gender issues, and stop any harassment.

Programs that have tried to reverse the negative patterns have had limited geographical coverage. Some

of the girls' education programs are part of other community development programs and reach only the targeted communities, leaving many rural girls still out of their reach. Thus, there is a tremendous need for more programs.

Girls' empowerment pilot project

Realizing this, a team of teachers, gender experts, physicians, nurses, social workers, and U.S. embassy¹⁴ staff (which funded the action) held various meetings to determine what to include in a multi-faceted 40-hour pilot program to empower rural girls. The group agreed that the program should do the following:

- a) Focus on demystifying menstruation and physical changes.
- b) Suggest ways girls can better manage their household chores and studies.
- c) Encourage girls to assume leadership roles at school and in community activities.
- d) Meet with parents, teachers, and community members to discuss the problems girls face and to help create an enabling environment for girls to study, attend, and stay in school.

A manual was written describing the goals and activities of the five-day program. The planning group also asked the Ministry of Education to support the program by informing to district education officers in three districts who would welcome and help the team carry out its activities.

The pilot program involved 75 girls at 15 schools from three remote districts (Nepal has 75 districts, 18 of which are in remote mountains or hills and the Terai plains).¹⁵ Five girls were selected from each of the 15 schools who were in grades 8 and 9, and were 13 to 16 years old. About half had already had their first menstrual period. Head-teachers and one classroom teacher, who helped select the girls in each school, were asked to choose those who had the greatest potential to benefit from the program and engage other girls about what they had learned. Since the districts were remote and had low literacy rates, most of the girls were the first generation to attend school.

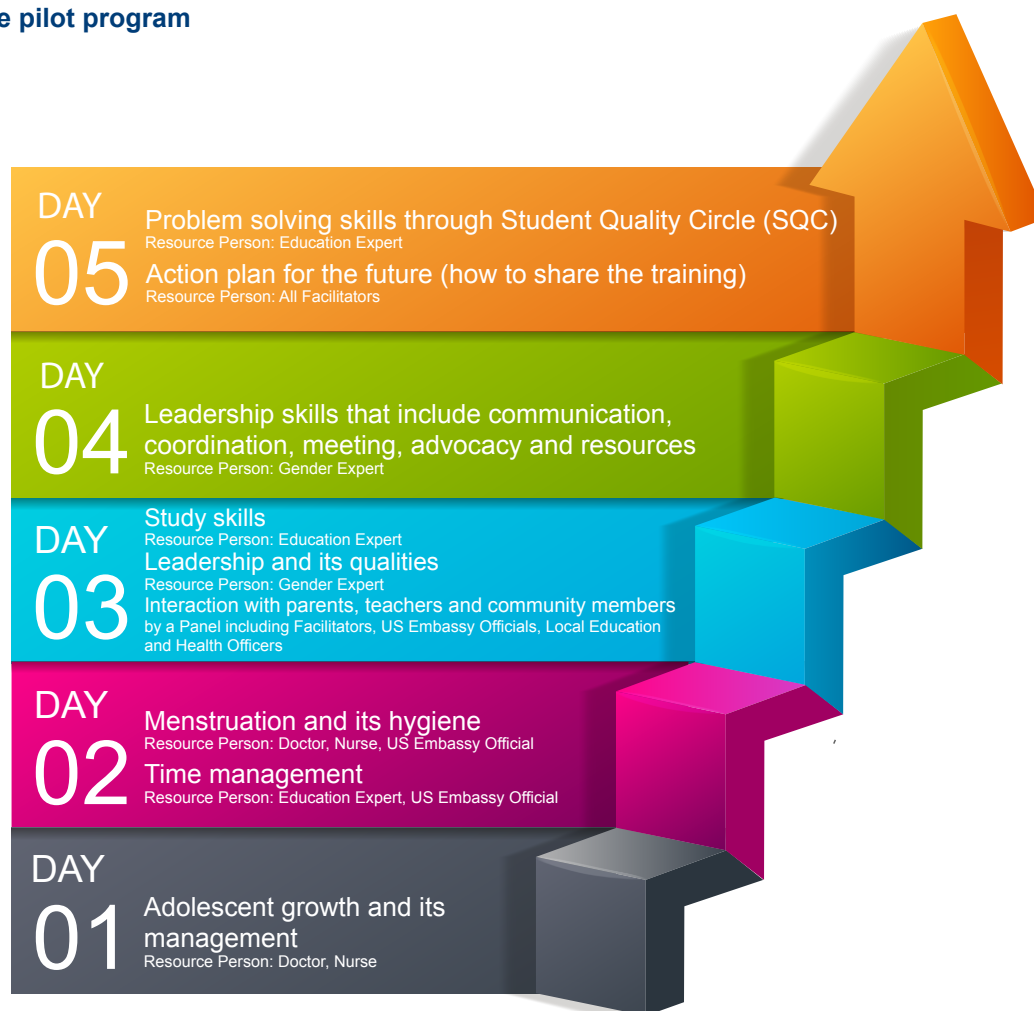
During the orientation session, facilitators explained the program's goals and activities to the girls who would participate. The 5-day program began immediately afterwards (see list of activities below). The

Figure 2: Districts in Nepal in which the pilot program was implemented



Source: <http://marketwatch.footprints.com.np/2015/05/district-maps-of-nepal/>

Figure 3: The pilot program



sessions lasted 60-90 minutes each. Each session included 25 girls who were divided into five groups.

Adolescent growth

This session focused on the physical and emotional changes girls face during adolescence, so as to demystify them. The groups studied the growth patterns of plants, animals, and insects and afterwards shared the information with the rest of the class. Some groups prepared posters, and even acted out the various life stages. Participants were also invited to ask the *experts* on topics they wanted to learn more about.

Girls were asked to share their experiences if they had already had their first periods. A female U.S. embassy officer, shared her personal experiences and stressed that menstrual periods were part of natural growth—hoping to remove the local stigmas and remove superstitions.

Those creating the program wanted to include facilitators with wide, global experiences since they could discuss these with the local community. Facilitators also explained the specifics, e.g., the age at which menstruation usually begins, the fact that girls need to have the materials they need—either commercial sanitary pads or those made at home from old cloth (the experts demonstrated how to do this). Also, facilitators used a UNICEF Nepal pamphlet called “Menstruation and Hygiene” (written in the Nepali language) and a video prepared by a sanitary pad company, which the girls said they wanted to share with other girls and women. Also, each girl was given two packets of pads. During the discussion, girls shared their thoughts about their communities’ customs and what they might be able to do to counter those that instilled fear and feelings of inferiority.

Managing time

Since girls are under a great deal of pressure to study and do household chores, they need help determining how to best manage their time. In the session devoted to this subject, the facilitators asked them to describe (in writing) their daily routines and how they might be able to use their time more efficiently. It was thought that when the girls showed their parents the extent of their tasks, they might reduce their household chores. They were also asked how these chores were distributed among the family members (including boys) and were encouraged to ask their parents to shift some of their chores to others so they can spend more time studying. Also, they were advised to prioritize their activities and told how to say no to some (for example, social events like sports) that would distract them from their studies. Next, they were asked to create a weekly calendar and chart their daily activities.

Study skills

The facilitators focused on skills such as:

1. How to take notes in class.
2. How to identify the key points when reading.
3. How to prepare for exams.
4. How to ask teachers for support.

The session began with a discussion about how the girls usually study; where they found certain subjects difficult, they were advised to allocate more time to them. Facilitators presented some tips, with illustrations, with respect to the skills listed above.

Leadership skills

As mentioned earlier, Nepal is a patriarchal society and girls—especially in rural areas—are shy and taught to be submissive. (I recall that when my sisters tried to participate in family or community discussions, adults told them that women should be quiet). Time has not changed this, and when women try to assert their rights, many communities still call them “*chicken crows*.” This explains why girls and women do not try to assume leadership roles in school and elsewhere.

Thus, the training inserted leadership skills into the sessions. On the first and subsequent days, four girls were asked to lead various activities. The positions

included a chair, who ensured that sessions began on time and that the others were punctual; a reporter, who took notes and presented summaries each day; entertainer(s), who made the sessions interactive and fun by telling jokes, leading songs, and organizing activities; a manager, who assumed administrative duties like ensuring tea and snacks were brought on time. The roles were rotated and helped the girls develop confidence to speak in and lead groups.

In the leadership sessions on the days that followed, the girls discussed the following:

1. Leadership styles.
2. Leadership tasks, such as how to run a meeting.
3. How to communicate.
4. How to coordinate activities.
5. How to pass on the information to other girls after the program ended.
6. How to assume leadership positions in school.
7. How leadership skills can advance the rights of women and girls.
8. How the skills can help them advocate for change.

These skills were taught through experiential activities. For example, girls were put in different groups, given hypothetical problems, and asked to apply the skills they were learning, which meant assuming leadership roles. They were also given reading materials on types of leaders (e.g., democratic or authoritarian). Further, they were asked to list the main problems (e.g., lack of trash cans in classrooms and toilet areas) and prioritize solutions for them. With the facilitator’s support, girls appointed a chair and secretary, created an agenda of topics to be covered, discussed them, and described the talks in the minutes.

Problem-solving skills

To nurture the leadership skills, girls participated in problem-solving activities through a Students’ Quality Circle (SQC) model—student-led project that aim to solve daily problems, such as the lack of water in toilets, bullying and harassment, unclean classrooms, etc. To get practical experience, girls were taught the following steps:

1. Form a group of about 5 to 8 girls, also include boys.
2. Identify the main problems they face in school.
3. Prepare and prioritize a list of the problems.
4. Identify the ones the group thinks it could solve.
5. Identify the strategies they could adopt to address the problems.
6. Develop an action plan to implement the strategies.
7. Launch the plan.
8. Document all the steps the groups take.
9. Present the class with a summary of what they did and if they think it solved the problem.

Each group identified at least three problems to solve at their schools, after they completed the program.

On the last day of the program, girls were asked to evaluate their five-day experience. In their assessments, they said the program helped them develop confidence. And, the groups of five girls from each school developed a one-year action plan on how to share with other girls what they had learned, and committed to launching the SQC project (see Results for a description of how the girls followed through).

Activities with parents, teachers, and community leaders

Communication between children and parents (mothers as well as fathers) is generally poor and girls are rarely consulted about household decisions. Thus, girls hesitate to tell parents about their problems or ask them about taboo subjects (such as puberty).

Attempting to shift some attitudes, facilitators met with teachers, parents, female community leaders, representatives from the District Education Office and the Ministry of Education, and local health workers to get them to support girls' education. The facilitators and female officials from the U.S. Embassy moderated the discussions, where girls, parents, and teachers were encouraged to ask questions; most parents asked about health and nutrition issues and how girls received support in other countries. Local health workers explained what services were available to help girls. Often, girls do not visit health facilities since they

hesitate to share their problems with the health personnel, who are usually male.

Facilitators described the community resources—including the 10 percent mandatory allocation in the local government budget earmarked for children's and women's activities, and government and nongovernmental scholarships. Often the problem is that the girls and their parents are unaware of such resources, although they are limited.

Girls were also encouraged to discuss early marriage with their parents to build a consensus that it is not only illegal but has negative effects. This ultimately helps create an alliance among parents, teachers, community leaders and the girls to prevent such practices. (See Results for a description of how these suggestions were received).

Further, female local political leaders and government employees encouraged the girls to proactively take leadership roles in school and the community. They shared their stories of struggle, how they balance study and household chores, how they set goals, and how they overcame the barriers.

By involving the community, girls could more easily manage their studies and health and be better equipped to assume leadership roles (see Results). In fact, when the program ended, many parents expressed their support for helping the girls become future leaders. What's more, parents were able to begin collaborating with teachers, seen widely as a first step toward bettering the lives of the girls.

Initial results

The girls produced written evaluations at the end of each day and at the close of the program. One year later, the girls met with the facilitator to reflect on what they had learned. Interestingly, most found they were better at both problem solving and decisionmaking.

In the one-year follow-up, the author contacted 32 of the 75 girls, along with some teachers and parents. It was apparent that while a brief program cannot transform the participants' lives, many of the activities had positive effects. These included the following:

Changed attitudes toward menstruation

Girls were handling the problems related to their menstrual periods more effectively, and many parents and teachers viewed menstruation as normal. All the girls in the follow-up concurred: 17 said that they were now us-

ing commercial sanitary pads purchased by their parents.

The rest were no longer making them, or washing and drying them, in secrecy. All found it was easier to talk about these issues with their mothers and get their support, such as providing more nutritional food and advice about their health issues. Girls also told other girls

what they had learned: One said, “We learned how to address the body changes in our age and how to maintain cleanliness during menstruation. We shared this with girls from grades 5 to 8 and we now plan to share it with others in the community, in the near future.”

Sixty percent said they are experiencing some regressions like being restricted from entering the kitchen and prayer room during rituals, but things have changed since the program: parents send them to school and buy them sanitary pads; 17 percent said the restrictions have not changed; and 23 percent said strict rules are not imposed but they voluntarily avoid the prayer room to please their parents.

Thus, the program has evidently helped some girls manage their periods more easily but issues remain with the ritual practices and beliefs. More work is clearly needed in this area.

Some parents also changed their behavior. Of the 32 girls in the follow-up, 15 said parents have begun to welcome girls into their rooms and family activities while they have their periods, and have given their daughters more nutritious food and milk, as well as sanitary supplies. One girl said, “My father buys me sanitary pads because I don’t have a mother at home. And because of the program, my father now asks about my problems and wants to help.” Similarly, a girl in Baglung said, “My parents no longer hate me and my sisters when we have our periods. They used

to scold us and imposed a lot of restrictions but now they are a bit liberal, allow us to go to the study room, and play with siblings.” Another girl said, “Male teachers would not allow us to go home if we had stomach pain, but now they do.” And a girl in Dadeldhura noted,

“My mother said that she was kept in isolation during her period and if she changed this pattern, allowing her daughters to move freely, this would be against the traditions and culture. But she now thinks that isolating me is not a good idea and lets me stay at home. I still have to sleep separately and am not allowed to fetch

water or work in the kitchen. But this is a big change.” Some teachers agreed that a number of parents seem to have changed their attitudes.

The girls also said it was important that female officials from the U.S. Embassy and local women leaders participated in the program—since their presence encouraged the girls and helped the parents increase their expectations about their daughters’ possibilities.

Improved study skills

Follow-up data shows that about 70 percent of the girls interviewed developed a time table and shared it with their parents; they said this helped them negotiate time to study, particularly during exams—and a few parents reduced their workloads. They are also allocating more time to study the difficult subjects. As yet, it is difficult to measure the impact with respect to their test scores, since the end-of-the-year tests had not yet been given during the follow-up visit. However, nearly 80 percent of the girls said they improved their study habits. Also, parents in the focus group said they were pleased that their daughters were more serious about their school work, and parents and teachers both said almost all the girls developed a calendar, which some shared with their teachers for feedback. Six teachers interviewed during the follow-up saw changes in the girls’ study habits and in the following:

- They ask questions if they don’t understand the material.

Effective girls empowerment programs must address a wider set of barriers at home and in schools.

- They consult the dictionary (each girl was given one during the program).
- They score better in the class exams.
- Their attendance improved, even when they had their periods.
- They appear more open-minded and share their feelings.
- They help other girls and boys who need assistance in some subjects.

However, the girls also said they still have many household chores and the load is still unequal (between them and their brothers). Also, they said more discussions with parents and brothers are needed to alter the gender stereotypes at home.

Improved school toilets

Six of 15 schools still did not have separate toilets for girls; the remaining nine were unclean and lacked water. Girls from three schools included cleaning the toilet in their action plans, without asking the school for help, since they had asked at an earlier time to no avail. In two schools, the toilets used only by the girls were clean: Girls in grades 8, 9, and 10 brought water from a nearby tap, stored it in a pot, and used it to flush. In the third school, conditions did not improve because two of the five girls who led the initiative transferred to another school and the other three were unwilling to continue with the plan. In one school in Baglung, the girls asked the head teacher to build a separate toilet for them. The school management committee put it on the agenda and construction was underway during the follow-up visit. Thus, there is evidence that once the girls realized they could play a role and had a voice, they actively tried to change conditions.

Improved leadership skills

Leadership skills too seem to have improved. One group of girls erased words they found inappropriate from walls and convinced students not to write them again. In another, to reduce the dust and trash in the classrooms, they collected money, bought plas-

tic buckets as trash bins for several classrooms, and shared the task of emptying them.

“Engaging adolescent girls in leadership activities is an important way of laying the foundations for the future leadership” (King and Winthrop 2015). Further, by creating the action plans, they improved their confidence to assume leadership roles, and, while in groups, collaborated successfully. They designed training sessions, organized meetings, and communicated with their peers. As noted by Kuria and Orton (2016), this self-confidence will help them succeed.

“From training, I learned to present my view without hesitation, and developed the confidence to do something on my own.”

“My perspective has changed a lot. I now feel that women should not be confined to the kitchen. I learned that women can lead and I will lead in my school and community activities”.

Participation in community activities

Girls have been participating in community activities since the program ended. Follow-up data shows that five girls in Bardiya have joined the local campaign against early marriage. In Dadeldhura, six girls stopped two early marriages, saying they were inspired by the program. When they first learned these girls were to be married and leave school, they spoke with their teachers, visited the parents and convinced them to stop the weddings—which worked! As a result, the two girls are still in school. A teacher in Baglung said, “One parent wanted to take his daughter from school and all five girls who were in the pilot program met with him and convinced him not to do this. Now the girl regularly comes to school.”

The girls expanded their scope well beyond the program activities and, at the time of the follow-up, were engaged in the following:

Leadership skills evolve organically only if girls are given opportunities to practice them during the training.

- a) They created a space in the staff room in all five schools where, with a teacher's help, they stored commercial sanitary pads (which the program supplied). Also, in three schools, the girls in grades 8, 9, and 10 bought trash cans for the girls' toilet in which to deposit the soiled pads.
- b) In two schools, girls asked the administration to buy sanitary pads for emergencies.
- c) In three schools, some girls ran time management sessions for other students, including boys.
- d) Altogether, about 15 girls joined advocacy campaigns organized by NGOs to protest and show solidarity against gender-based violence, to plant trees, and to promote anti-trafficking awareness programs.

By engaging in such activities, the girls realize they can have a wider affect on the larger community (Jahangir and Mankani 2016).

Increased social capital

The program helped expand the girls' social capital; some are even tutoring boys in some subjects. One said, "Boys have come to us, asking us to share information about the time management techniques and study skills we learned in the program. So we create groups to do this and I'm happy to help the boys." Of six schools visited during the follow-up, the girls in four trained boys in various skills.

Some have also created no smoking zones in schools, fought against gender and caste-based discrimination, and formed community clubs for social causes (such as green club for tree plantation).

Scaling and Expanding the Program

Pilot programs have demonstrated that if empowerment training encompasses the relevant skills required for girls to overcome the challenges, and they are practically exercising their leadership potential, this leads them toward the process of gradual empowerment. The program is also unique in that it combines

study skills with adolescent growth issues. Thus, this program has the potential to scale up, and scaling-up can be done in different ways. The program can be adopted in its entirety or it can focus on various parts (Cooley and Kohl 2006; Coffman 2010).

For example, the lower and secondary (grades 6 to 10) school curriculum included managing adolescent changes and sexual and reproductive health; but, many teachers did not address them adequately in class, since they are still considered taboo in various rural communities. Thus, any scaled-up programs will need to offer these subjects to help educate and empower secondary level girls to manage their physical

growth challenges, succeed in their studies, and prepare them to take leadership roles as demonstrated in the pilot program and the global literature in girls' education (Robinson, Winthrop and McGivney, 2016; Cornwall 2016; Hoole 2016; Jahangir 2016; Makunja 2016; Murphy-Graham and Lloyd 2016; Raynor 2006;

Wanjama and Njuguna 2016; Doukoure 2016).

Similarly, some elements—such as menstrual hygiene, time management, study skills, and problem-solving skills—can be integrated into the school curricula and teacher training.

Government options to scale up empowerment programs: General policy considerations

a) Appoint more female teachers to secondary level schools

Education regulations in 2002 required there be at least one female teacher at primary schools (HMG/NPC 2002), and since then their number gradually increased from 22 percent of the total in 2002 to 41 percent in 2014. However, they are not required at both secondary levels. The government is now recruiting thousands of teachers and is reserving a certain number of slots for females. Since the exams are competitive, the gov-

ernment should offer free preparation courses for female candidates, as it does for civil servants.

To further ensure that these changes are nationwide, the Ministry of Education should require there be at least one female teacher at both secondary levels, which will help support rural girls.

b) Include gender-sensitive curricula and textbooks

Globally, it has been found that curricula and textbooks do not adequately cover gender issues and that females are greatly under-represented stereotypes in the texts (King and Winthrop 2015). In Nepal, although a study of primary school curricula and textbooks found they are gradually including gender issues, stereotypes still exist (CDC 2013). Because the country is shifting to a federal system based on the new constitution,¹⁶ and grades K-12 will be managed at the provincial level, it is the right time to promote gender-sensitive issues. To this end, the government should adopt materials and prepare human resources staff to assess them for their effectiveness.

There is a growing literature about 21st century skills, which include critical thinking along with financial and socio-emotional issues in the education ecosystem (Care, Anderson and Kim 2016). In Nepal, the government's School Sector Development Plan (2016 – 2022)¹⁷ vaguely mentions *promoting* life skills and value-based education in the curricula and textbooks, but courses that focus on them have not yet been developed. Thus, the Curriculum Development Center needs to identify them and develop the teachers' capacity to foster them.

c) Offer gender-sensitive teacher training

The curricula, textbooks, and classroom activities are not gender sensitive in many countries (UNESCO 2016), but to create a fair and equitable society, education should be gender responsive, both in the learning materials and the teachers' approaches. "Gender inclusive teaching proactively addresses the challenges that both girls and boys may face in receiving an excellent education" (IREX 2016). They should be trained to use gender-sensitive, and gender-related

concepts can be integrated in the teaching materials, classroom lessons, language, and evaluations.¹⁸ Once the provincial governments develop the new curricula and textbooks, the in-service teacher training unit of the Ministry of Education and pre-service teacher training institutions, such as the universities, should include gender-sensitive components so the concepts of equity can be stressed at the start. Also, the unequal power relations in schools is rooted in student, teacher, and community traditions, all significant parts of students', particularly girls, learning processes (Bhana 2016).

Thus, teacher training should "focus on transforming the unequal relations of power that perpetuate and tolerate both physical and psychological violence against girls and women" (Sperling, Winthrop and Kwauk 2016). The Ministry of Education and universities should collaborate with organizations to guide teaching center instructors and university faculty to focus on the topic. IREX's gender-responsive pedagogy and FAWE's gender-responsive pedagogy¹⁹ could be models for this effort.

d) Create cooperation between the government and development partners' program

Development organizations in Nepal have been already been involved in girls' empowerment programs and want to join with the government to develop policies and programs to promote them. The government has committed to collaborating with NGOs to promote its development agenda. Existing collaborations can be strengthened if NGOs and the government commit to meeting regularly. Also, sharing research and success stories would cultivate a united approach to reaching gender equity in education. The government, collaborating with the Association of International NGOs in Nepal,²⁰ could develop a formal structure through which these activities are advanced.

Expand the program to other districts and schools

Since the pilot program was conducted, many schools in remote rural districts have asked that it be replicated in their areas. If resources were available, this could be accomplished, incorporating the lessons learned, along with experiences from other countries.

Figure 4: Theory of change for girls' empowerment in a rural context

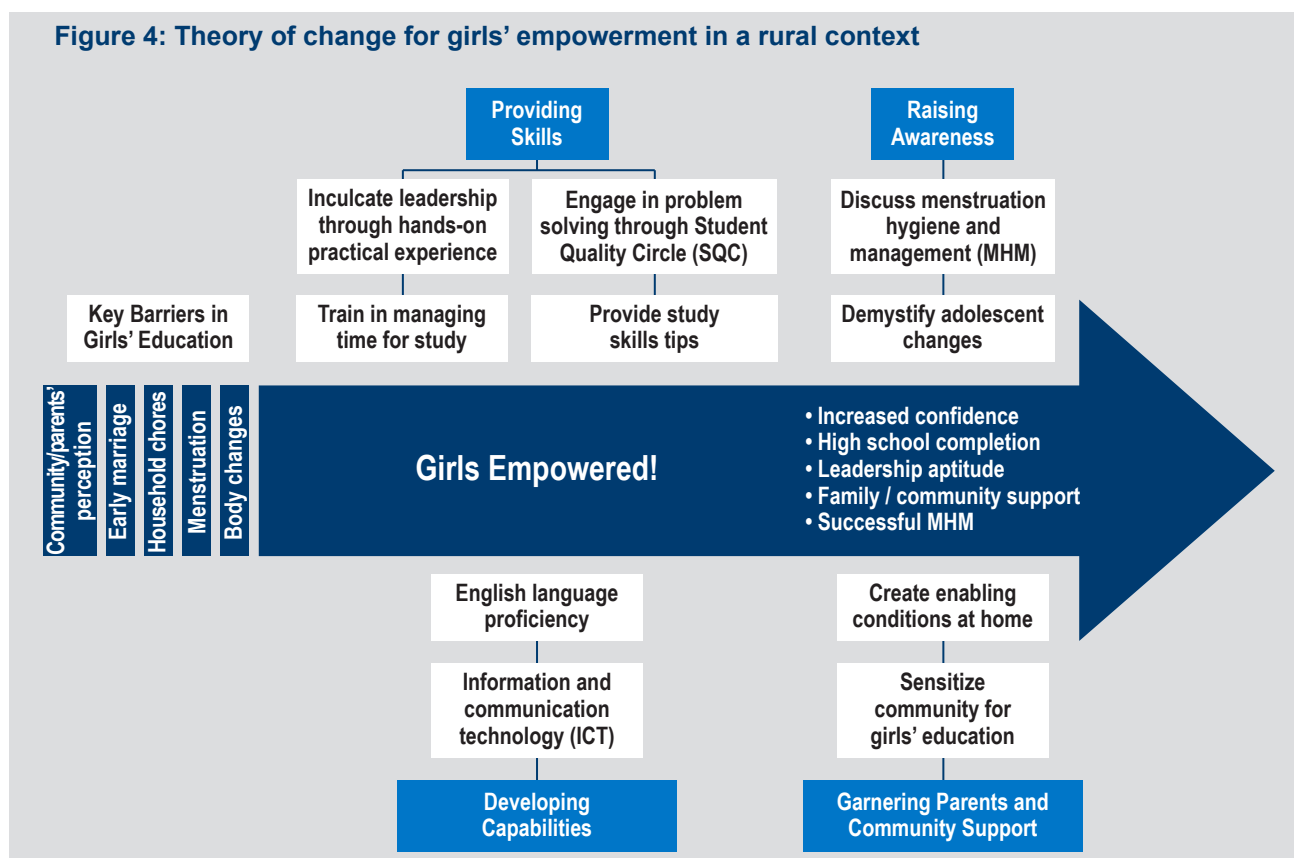


Figure 4 shows that empowerment is a continuous process. Thus, the empowerment journey of adolescent girls should begin by addressing the key content areas highlighted in the boxes above, which will prepare them to successfully manage their adolescent growth and study.

Contents of the scaled-up programs

The scaled-up programs would focus on raising awareness, developing skills, and engaging parents, teachers, and community representatives in the following areas:

- Provide information that will help girls to adapt to the changes that occur during adolescence, including removing the taboos.
- Help them manage the time needed to do homework, study for exams and complete household chores.
- Provide advice about study skills.
- Develop leadership skills in communicating, negotiating, coordinating, and conducting meetings.

- Use the concept of the SQC to address school and community issues through group projects.
- Prepare action plans through which girls can share the information with other students.
- Raise awareness among parents, teachers, community leaders and local health personnel about the barriers to girls' education.

The pilot program sessions were not long enough to break the established socio-cultural practices of early marriage or isolating daughters during menstrual periods. Thus, when the program is scaled up, more time should be allotted to these meetings.

The expanded pilot should continue to invite female foreign individuals through organizations such as World-Teach, which has already worked in Nepal with U.S. volunteers who taught during two summer months.

During the initial pilot, many girls said they needed to learn English and computing skills. In fact, studies have shown that graduates who know English and have

computer skills have greater job opportunities, and Nepal is no exception. While the government has supplied each school with computers and internet facilities, the students in rural schools are not being trained. English and information technology courses should be available for all students despite their location.

Options for the pilot team to scale-up the program

a) Expand the policy dialogue with the government

The government will need to ensure that enough resources are allocated to girls' empowerment programs. The Ministry of Education will need to express its commitment, which can be a lengthy process. Some district officials have already been involved in the initial program, which started the dialogue that can be enlarged to include higher level authorities.

b) Create workshops in teacher training programs that promote gender-sensitive methods

Since Tribhuvan University is revising its bachelors' level education curricula, it is an opportune time to introduce the teaching of life skills and the use of gender-sensitive models in two core courses, *Methods of Teaching* and *Student Teaching*. A series of workshops on these topics need to be planned with the input of the dean of the faculty of education at Tribhuvan University.

c) Collaborate with the donor community

The pilot team must identify the organizations working in Nepal that might want to collaborate, based on their priorities. Also, a workshop could be held in Kathmandu for members of the Association of the International NGOs in Nepal to begin discussing joint efforts. Also, the team should seek funding from organizations that already provide resources for girls' education in Nepal.

d) Provide books and other reading material for the girls

Although the girls asked for books on the subjects covered by the program, few are translated into Ne-

pali. Thus, the team should ask publishers to do this. Such books could include the following:

1. *The Care and Keeping of You. The Body Book for Younger Girls*, by Valorie Lee Schaefer, Cara Natterson, MD., illustrated by Josee Masse. American Girls Publishing, 2012.
2. *What to Expect When You Go to the Doctor*, by Heidi Murkoff, illustrated by Laura Rader. Harper Festival, 2000.
3. *Just for Girls. Understanding Your Body and the Changes You're Going Through*, by Elizabeth M. Hekstra and M. Beth Cutaiar. Crossway Books, 1999.
4. *Youth Leadership. A Guide to Understanding Leadership Development in Adolescents*, by Josephine A. van Linden and Carl I. Fertman. Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998.

Conclusion

Although girls have immense potential to grow, the lack of an enabling environment along with conservative social-cultural values still deprive those in rural Nepal of their educational rights. Due to severe barriers, they drop out of secondary school and are stuck in the same circumstances that have confined generations of women before them.

The literature and programs designed to address these problems find that to break these patterns—which serve the girls so poorly—they need to understand and challenge the barriers that impede change. For this they need various skills along with a voice to make their case. The empowerment program described in this report educates high school girls and affords them the confidence to take leadership roles at school and in their community—and ultimately remain in school.

If the program were scaled up, as discussed in the previous section, many more girls in rural Nepal could benefit. And many of those at risk of dropping out could fashion a different future.

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Notes

1. Until the recent past, there were four different levels of school education in Nepal: i) Pre-primary (K), ii) Primary (Grade 1 – 5), Lower Secondary (Grade 6 – 8), Secondary (Grade 9 – 10) and Higher Secondary (Grade 11 – 12). With the recent revision of the Education Act, 2016, the school level education will be i) Basic and ii) Secondary level.
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5. <http://www.supremecourt.gov.np/web/justices>
6. http://www.np.undp.org/content/dam/nepal/docs/projects/UNDP_NP_PREPARE_the-nepal-civil-service-and-re-structuring-of-the-state.pdf
7. Nepali online newspaper www.setopati.com on 8/9/2016.
8. This was the case of Jumla and Kalikot districts located in far western hills and mountains. The overall literacy rate in Jumla was 54 percent, with 68 percent males and 40 percent females. And in Kalikot, it was 56 percent, with 67 percent males and 45 percent females. Chhaupadi is widely practiced in these districts.
9. This study was carried out in only one district (out of 75) called Chitwan, located in the central Terai region. Here the overall literacy rate is 77 percent—84 percent for males and 71 percent for females (UNESCO, 2013).
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