



Continuity and change in social norms for Nepali adolescent girls: the drivers and inhibitors of early marriage and education

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Key messages

- Study findings show that girls and boys have increasing decision making power over when and whom they marry compared to their mothers' and grandmothers' generations. However, this remains uneven, with girls continuing to have less say than boys.
- While the age of marriage is increasing for arranged marriages, particularly for girls, for those who choose love marriages or elopement, the age at marriage is decreasing – and this is true for both girls and boys.
- Increased enrolment in higher education, coupled with the rise in average age of arranged marriage, have led to positive impacts on girls' access to education. Despite this, dropout rates for girls remain high, and there is evidence of son bias in household expenditure on education.
- Long-term interventions such as government or NGO programmes to tackle gender discrimination have proven to be the most important drivers of change around girls' education and marriage; migration is not a strong driver of change in the study communities.
- Men have a key role to play in tackling gender discriminatory norms and their role as drivers of change should be encouraged. Other family members and female role models within the community can also be important drivers of change.

1 Introduction

Q: What do they [parents] expect from sons?

A: They expect their sons to look after them when they are old. If they are sick, they expect that we provide medicine to them.

Q: What do they expect from their daughters?

A: They expect very little from their daughters. They think that their daughters will leave their home, so have no expectation as such. They also pay no attention to their daughters' education.

(In-depth interview with school-going adolescent boy, aged 16m in Salena, Doti district)

Nepal has made impressive progress in recent decades in its human development indicators, and in promoting human rights and gender parity, which, if continued, will see it graduate out of the ranks of least developed countries by 2022. However, this progress has been experienced unevenly, and adolescent girls and young women are still subject to discriminatory social norms that greatly hinder their capability for achieving overall wellbeing. In order to address these discriminatory norms, it is important to understand why and how they may change and evolve, on the one hand, or why they remain sticky (difficult to change) on the other. Understanding these factors can inform relevant policies and programmes to maximise their impact on achieving broader wellbeing for adolescent girls and young women.

Box 1: About this study

This study is part of a broader multi-country, multi-year initiative funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) on gender justice for adolescent girls (the other countries being Ethiopia, Uganda and Viet Nam). Broadly speaking, the study focuses on social norms, how they fit into the lives of adolescent girls, and how they affect girls' capabilities.

This study is part of a broader multi-country and multi-year study on adolescent girls and young women (See Box 1). Findings from the first round of the study (year 1) showed that social norms are pivotal in shaping the capabilities of adolescent girls and young women; they showed that some norms are evolving and transforming rapidly to the benefit of girls and young women, while others remain unchanged or 'sticky'. Early marriage is one such 'sticky' norm; Nepal continues to have one of the highest rates of early marriage in the world, at 51% (UNICEF, 2011), with girls four times more likely to get married when they are children than boys (Amin et al., 2014). Furthermore, because early marriage typically means that girls no longer continue their education, it leads to a range of other capability deprivations, including lack of employment opportunities and inability to access individual rights (Ghimire et al., 2013). Given this context, the second phase of the study (year 2) focused on exploring in more depth the underlying causes of early marriage and its pivotal role in affecting other aspects of adolescent girls' lives, particularly education. Using qualitative approaches, a range of tools were developed, including in-depth and key informant interviews, marriage network case studies and intergenerational trios. These tools were administered to girls and women but also to other reference groups who play a crucial role in maintaining or changing social norms, including male peers, fathers, in-laws, husbands, teachers, and other key people in the local community. The next section provides an overview of the study sites. Section 3 presents key findings, and the briefing concludes with some programming and policy recommendations in section 4.

2 Study sites: Doti district – Wayal and Salena



Picture 1: Wayal, Doti

The year 2 study returned to one of the districts where year 1 research was carried out – Doti, which was known to have high rates of early marriage. In order to avoid saturation, two new locations were selected: Bhumirajmadau (Salena) Village Development Committee (VDC), to represent a rural context, and Durgamadau (Wayal) VDC, to represent a semi-rural context.

Bhumirajmadau (or Salena) is around 20 km from the regional headquarters of Dipayal (also the main market for the VDC) and around 25 km from district headquarters at Silgadi, the administrative hub for the district. Salena has a total of 911 households and a population of 4,857 (2,245 men and 2,612 women), of which adolescents comprise almost one quarter (24.23%). Over half of the population (53.83%) is Chhetri, followed by Brahmin-Hill (22.66%), Dalits (9.77%) and others (13.74%) (NPCS and CBS, 2011). The VDC has a literacy rate of 53.46%, but there is a wide gender gap: the male literacy rate is 70.02% compared with a female literacy rate of 39.65%. The VDC has one health post and eight schools (four primary and four secondary); of these, seven are government-run Nepali-language schools, while one is a private English-language school. Most households in Salena derive their livelihoods from subsistence agriculture and are heavily reliant on remittances from male migrants.

Durgamadau (or Wayal) is around 30 km from the regional headquarters, Dipayal, and is comprised of 858 households, with a population of 3,942 (23.51% of which are adolescents) (NPCS and CBS, 2011). As in

Salena, the majority of its residents (40.51%) are Chhetri, followed by Brahmin-Hill (23.51%), Kami (18.72%), Dalit (6.26%) and others (11%) (ibid). The VDC has a literacy rate of 51.33%, and again the male literacy rate (71.78%) is much higher than the female literacy rate (37.12%). There is one government health centre serving Wayal, and two private clinics and six schools (five primary and one higher secondary). In addition to subsistence agriculture and migrant remittances, and even though Durgamadau is further away from the main centre of Doti than Salena, it has a small upcoming market area, is economically more vibrant, and has a regular transport system and services such as police posts.

As well as having high levels of in-migration from other districts of Nepal's Far Western region, many men from Doti migrate for work either to districts in the Terai valley or beyond. For the past 50 years or so, this area has been characterised by its very high rate of male migration to India; more recently (the past three to four years), people have also begun to migrate elsewhere, including to Malaysia and the Gulf countries. As such, migration means that lack of adult men of productive age is a dominant feature of these study sites.



Picture 2: They are there and ready to help: older men participating in historical timeline about marriage in Wayal.

3 Key findings

3.1 Change and continuity in norms around marriage

3.1.1 Age at marriage

While child marriage is still prevalent, the study found that the average age at marriage has increased from 5–6 in their grandmothers' generation and 10–12 in their mothers' generation, to 14–18 among the present generation. As these marriages generally tend to be arranged marriages, parents seem to be more aware of the importance of marrying their daughters later. In comparison to their mothers' generation, the age gap between spouses has correspondingly decreased for today's young girls, from an average of 18 years then to between three and seven years now. However, in the case of elopement, or where a girl and boy themselves decide to marry and do so without their parents' permission, the age of marriage is in fact decreasing, with some couples marrying as young as 13 years of age (see below). While people (including adolescents) are increasingly aware of both the legal age of marriage and the harms of early marriage, social norms around chastity of girls and family honour usually take precedence.

3.1.2 Decision-making in marriage

Girls' involvement in decision-making about their marriage has increased compared with their mothers' and grandmothers' generations; however, it has not changed on a par with boys' involvement in decision-making about their marriage. While their mothers and grandmothers were not informed about when and whom they would marry, nowadays daughters are generally informed by their parents about any marriage proposal, the prospective groom and his family. However, it is for information purposes only; it is not seeking their consent, and girls still do not have the final say about whether they accept a proposal, and when to marry. Even though many parents stated that it was the girls' final decision, our interviews with girls and their mothers showed that in some cases this was not so. This is also reinforced by the fact that most girls had never met their prospective husband before the marriage. There are, however, a few cases where girls and boys in arranged marriages were allowed to see each other and establish contacts via mobile phone before marriage. This has happened when there is mutual interest and common friends (see Box 2).

Box 2: Role of friends and mobile phones in changing marriage arrangements

Manashi's parents had fixed her marriage without letting her see the prospective groom. However, she wanted to see the boy, but she was afraid to tell her parents. Instead, she told her best friend about her wish to see the boy before marriage. Her friend managed to get the phone number of the boy from her boyfriend, who was also from the same village as Manashi's prospective groom. She arranged that they could see each other at the village fair. Manashi went to the fair with her friend and the boy came with his friends. They did see each other, from a distance. Both of them liked each other and started to talk over the phone. A few months later they got married.

Source: Fieldwork, Doti, 2014

3.1.3 Love marriages and elopement

Along with girls having more of a say in the processes involved in an arranged marriage, love affairs between boys and girls have become more common in the past three to four years. Most boys and girls who elope to get

married are aged between 13 and 17. Typically, they choose to elope because the girl's parents will not consent to the marriage. Much of the relationship takes place through mobile phones and the boys and girls would have met only a few times. In some cases, they may even have met before deciding to elope and get married.

There are several potentially negative impacts of such marriages. First, as already mentioned, they have resulted, in the study sites, in some couples marrying much younger, with the average age at marriage decreasing among young people who choose love marriages or elopement. This also means that girls (and, indeed, sometimes boys) drop out of education, with girls bearing children very early. Second, considerable efforts have gone into raising awareness and persuading parents to marry their daughters later, but there is evidence of a social backlash, with parents again preferring to marry their daughters at an early age, fearing they will otherwise elope. Elopement carries considerable stigma for a girl's family: as well as being blamed for bringing up a girl 'loosely', they will also have difficulty marrying their remaining daughters, as the family will be seen to be less 'cultured'.

While parents blame access to mobile phones as the cause of such marriages, our fieldwork shows that although mobile phones have made it easier for boys and girls to communicate with each other, it is the social stigma associated with girls interacting with boys that contributes to this type of marriage. This stigma is rooted in social norms around ideal 'girls' and notions of purity and honour for girls, as well as the lack of mentorship and hence inability to manage changing adolescent relationships. Thus, when girls and boys merely talk to each other more frequently, it is seen as a love affair and the girl is seen as having a loose character and dishonouring her family. This can lead to suspicions around her virginity and she is relentlessly scrutinised for that. In such cases, the boy feels responsible for tarnishing her honour and takes it as his responsibility to save her name, which he does by marrying her.

3.1.4 Polygamy

While previously, polygamy did not appear to be prevalent in Doti district, in the past four to five years, polygamous unions appear to be on the increase, particularly among men aged 28–40. In such cases, the first wife – who is usually a young woman – bears the brunt of polygamy. She is socially isolated as she does not live with the husband but lives instead in her spouse's ancestral home, with his parents. The husband and the second wife often claim to provide well for the first wife and her children; this is reinforced by his parents, who also say that they give the earnings from the land to the first wife, thus generally reassuring outsiders that this first wife is well supported. However, we found that the first wife in a polygamous union was often socially, economically and emotionally estranged. When asked why they married twice, men usually responded by saying that they felt obliged to marry and save the girl's honour once it became known that he was *'talking and joking with the girl'*.

3.1.5 Pressure to bear children early and to bear a son

What remains unchanged, or where social norms remain 'sticky', is the pressure for young women to bear children early and particularly to bear a son. Thus, out of fear of polygamy – which is accepted either if the first wife fails to bear a child within the first few years or if she fails to bear a son – women continue to bear children despite sometimes being in poor health. This pressure comes mainly from their in-laws and the wider community, but also, as some girls fear, from their husbands too (see Box 3).

Box 3: Pressure to bear a son

Kunta is 20 years old and has three daughters. There were a lot of complications when she was pregnant with her second child, and she had to stay in a hospital in India for six months before finally giving birth. She is frail and does not want to have any more children now. But she is pregnant again because her parents-in-law want her to have a son. She is confused but thinks it is also the wish of her husband.

Source: Outlier case study, 2014.

In the case of women who cannot bear children, it is the woman who is regarded as infertile and not the man; similarly, it is women who are sent for fertility testing (usually in India), and not men.

‘...the middle one has not been able to conceive till now and we will have to get her checked up next year... It has been two years since their marriage, but till now nothing has happened. She needs to be checked up.’

(Marriage network case study with father-in-law, age 55, in Wayal, Doti)

Despite pressure to bear sons, we did not find any cases of sex-selective abortion in Doti during both years of fieldwork. It is rather that women continue to get pregnant and give birth until they have a son. The social norms that drive this practice are based on beliefs among elders and young women alike that because a daughter goes away from her home after marriage, her parents need a son not only to look after them in old age but also to continue the lineage – a task that can only be done by a son.

3.2 Change and continuity in norms around education

3.2.1 Enrolment in schools

According to study respondents (backed up also by quantitative data, for further details see Ghimire et al, 2014), there have been positive changes in enrolment in education for adolescent girls in Salena and Wayal, with adolescents and adults alike reporting that enrolment in schools has increased for boys and girls in both VDCs over the past five to six years. Previously, girls were sometimes not sent to school at all, whereas now, some girls are even sent to tuition classes after school and their domestic workload is taken on by the mother. As a result, almost all children of school-going age in the two VDCs have been enrolled in primary education.

Children are also being enrolled in school at an earlier age, aided by greater availability of schools near to their homes. Previously, children were typically enrolled in school between the ages of six and eight, when they were able to walk to school by themselves (there were no vehicles or roads and the children had to walk through forests). Now, there are primary schools in the neighbourhood and hence children can enrol in school as early as age four (the minimum age for government schools) and even earlier in private schools. This has had a positive impact, particularly on girls’ access to higher education. Previously, girls in grade 8–9 were considered already of marriageable age, and had to drop out of school when they married. Now, because they are enrolling in school at a much earlier age, combined with the average age at marriage increasing to 16-18 years, most girls can study up to grade 10 without having to drop out.

3.2.2 Education after marriage: daughters-in-law going to school

While marriage remains one of the main reasons why girls in Doti drop out of school, positive changes are evident in both Wayal and Salena, with a few girls continuing their education after marriage. In these cases, either the girl’s parents negotiated before marriage that their daughter could continue her education, or it was the in-laws and the husband who insisted that she stay on in school. However, except for two cases, most girls stopped going to school after they had given birth. Also, and again except for those two cases, girls who continued their education after marriage did not leave the community to attend a higher education institution. Thus, there is a tendency for married adolescents to study only up to grades that are locally available – i.e., up to grade 12.

3.2.3 Value of higher education

Norms around education for girls today have undergone substantive change since their grandmothers’ generation (when educated girls were considered to be witches) and their mothers’ generation (when parents did not educate their daughters because they feared they would elope if they went to school and mixed with boys). Parents now enrol girls in school because they are aware of the value of literacy but also because, when girls are relatively young, there are only limited chores they can do at home, and there is less fear of very young girls eloping. Despite education now generally being seen as a good quality in a girl, and increased primary enrolment rates, dropout rates at secondary level remained high in the study sites, mirroring the national figure of 20% of girls and boys dropping out once they reach grade 8. Thus higher education is not valued sufficiently strongly in itself to make a girl desirable or a ‘good wife’ and so most parents do not tend to invest in higher education for their daughters. Similarly, while being educated is an important criterion for an eligible groom, it

is not the most important criteria for an eligible bride. For girls, ‘*sanskar*’ – a combination of obedience and humbleness – is considered more important than education.

‘Here sometimes an educated boy prefers a girl who follows culture even if she is not well educated – it depends on their way of behaving with others and her work. People also see other qualities like family culture. Even if a girl is not educated, boys accept them.’

(Key informant interview with head of village, aged 67, Salena)

Other reasons why girls drop out of secondary education include workload, failure in exams, influence of peers, economic reasons, marriage, or restrictions on their free movement outside the home, which can prevent them going outside the VDC for higher education. Teachers and key informants as well as adolescent girls who participated in the research in both study sites believed that as girls get older, their ability to continue education becomes progressively more difficult due to household responsibilities (see Box 4). Their heavy domestic work burden leaves girls with limited time to study, and what little time they do have is mostly at night when they are very tired. This, in turn, affects their results. Study respondents in both locations also noted that many students (girls and boys) fail the exam they are required to sit to go into grade 8, which is administered by the government board, because it is tougher than that administered by their school. It was noted that after failing an exam, adolescents feel ashamed and demotivated to continue their education. Some adolescents are also influenced by their peers: when a girl’s best friends do not go to school, she is likely to not go; boys often drop out of education to go to India to work, sometimes encouraged by their friends and family. Additionally, once boys reach grade 8, they are also eligible to apply for a job in the armed forces. Since for many boys their main purpose of studying is to get a job, and a job in the armed forces is what many aspire to, they often stop their education after this level. If they fail to join the armed forces, they are likely to migrate to India to start earning an income rather than re-join school.

Box 4: Girls vs boys and the seeds of an inferiority complex

In one of the schools visited by the research team, girls came to school at 6 am. Around 9 am, they had a lunch break. During this break, their mother, who was in the field working, would send them a message on their mobile phone that the grass had been cut and was ready to be taken home. The girls take the bundle to their homes, which are far away, and only return to classes if they feel like it. But since the school closes at 12 noon it is often hardly worth their returning. As well as taking the grass their mother has cut, they often have to cut more grass on their way back home when they return after the school closes. Once they get home they are immersed in household work. This does not apply to boys.

In such circumstances, a girl cannot give much time to her studies and therefore she is usually behind or fails in class. This creates a feeling of inferiority and hopelessness and, even if girls are not forced to drop out or to marry early, they may become inactive in class. Girls do not tend to repeat classes after failure because they feel they would still not pass the exam on the second attempt. Hence, after failing once, they choose to quit studying altogether. Once a girl leaves school, she is very likely to get married as early as possible.

Source: Fieldwork, Salena, Doti, 2014

3.2.4 Continuing son bias in perceived ‘quality’ education

While there has been much improvement in enrolment of girls in the study sites (as well as nationally), there is still a gender gap in household expenditure on education. When parents have the means, boys are usually sent to English-language private schools, which are perceived to offer a better quality education, while girls attend Nepali-language government schools, where education is perceived to be lower quality.

‘Our school is a [government] secondary school from 1st to 10th grade. In each class we can only find two boys, all the other students are girls. I do not know whose fault it is, either it is the fault of the parents or the school management committee, or the staff of the school... People lovingly send their sons to the boarding schools thinking that boarding are better and the girls they send to the government, saying: “We do not care if you study or not” or even they do not send them to school.’

(Community timeline (education focus) 2014, Salena, Doti)

Since government schools are free, it is also easier for pupils to miss school, as shown in Box 5, also perpetuating the idea that government schools provide low-quality education.

Box 5: Low attendance in government schools

Due to their workload at home or in the fields, boys and girls in government schools come to school regularly only during the last quarter of the year when the planting and harvesting of rice and wheat is complete. Teachers say that they keep waiting for students to turn up so that they can take classes. However, this is not the case with private schools. Teachers believe that in private schools, as parents have invested their money in educating their children, they are more alert and send the children to school regularly, and hence the students turn up throughout the year.

Source: Fieldwork, Salena, Doti, 2014

3.2.5 Education, careers and employment for girls

There is a clear disjuncture in perceptions about the outcomes of education. When men, women and boys who participated in the research talked about educating a girl, they never talked about education as a means to opening up new avenues or widening the possibilities for the girl's employment or career. Rather, there is an expectation that educated girls may be more broad-minded and, among other things, will be more likely than illiterate girls to put their family's needs first. There is no concept of a career for a woman at any stage of the life cycle, whether as a daughter, wife or daughter-in-law. However, for adolescent girls, higher education was regarded as a conduit to taking up occupations such as teaching and nursing.

Parents are also not interested in girls taking on jobs, principally because a daughter's earnings do not contribute to the family; hence having a daughter who is employed is of no direct economic help. According to local social norms, parents are not supposed to use any money earned by their daughters for household expenditures, so rather than allow their daughters to complete their education and take up employment, parents would rather marry the daughter off.

'There is no concept of using a daughter's earnings. We would rather marry her and she can take employment from her husband's home. So parents do not think that "my daughter will earn and I will get economic help".'

(Community timeline (marriage focus), 2014, Salena, Doti)

3.3 Drivers of change

Social norms in Wayal and Salena are deeply rooted in religion; people tend to adhere to them very strongly and they guide people's everyday lives. Nevertheless, norm change is happening, or rather there is evidence of changes in people's everyday practices which are, in turn, likely to change social norms. Drivers of change originate both inside and outside the community, drawing from and building on each other. The following subsections identify the main drivers of change, both external and internal, as found in our study sites.

3.3.1 Long-term intentions and policies to empower women

Long-term interventions from government or non-government organisations (NGOs) (national and international) and government policies designed to empower women and girls have proven to be the most important external drivers of change. These include programmes like the Mothers' groups, 'Kishori Sanjal' (Adolescent Girls' Network) and the School Sector Reform Programme. The work of the Ministry of Women and Social Welfare was seen to be important in helping to build women's agency. It not only facilitated women to form saving groups, but also through training, raised women's awareness and self-confidence. This created a cadre of female agents of change who were able to stimulate social reforms that were beneficial for women and young girls.

Such reforms included abolishing the ‘*chaupadi*’ practice,¹ acting against domestic violence (as well as building safe houses for women who experienced domestic violence), and preventing alcoholism in men.

In education, the government’s School Sector Reform Programme has succeeded in increasing girls’ enrolment and retention rates. Among other things, these policies have been able to mobilise young people and other members of the community, also providing them with information and exposing them to new ways of doing things. These have been very effective in creating awareness and influencing other local-level mediators of change such as women’s groups, men, schools and family members to accept new ways of perceiving social norms around gender.

3.3.2 Local role models and male family members

Strong female role models are critical in helping to change social norms, and are usually women who work in the development, education or health sectors. Some of these women, especially teachers, have helped acted as role models for adolescent girls while others are actively engaged in efforts to end discrimination against girls and to stop gender-based violence and harmful social practices that affect women. Similarly, young people can also be important role models for their peers, who look to them as agents for change. They can introduce adolescents to new ways of thinking and doing things, and are involved in changing traditional practices in society. When such young people are able to take up positions as local leaders, heads of peer groups, government representatives or local teachers, they are important agents for change and open people’s minds towards change.

Importantly, the outlier case studies reveal that where girls have been able to achieve a certain level of education or employment beyond local expectations, male relatives (whether fathers, fathers-in-law or husbands) have been an important source of support. In addition, successful women have also usually (and critically) had the support of local political leaders and government organisations at some time in their lives, which helped them achieve more than other women (see Box 6).

Box 6: Support of in-laws and husband important for continuing education

Radhika lives in Salena and was married when she was studying in grade 10. Her husband is educated and is a police officer. Her parents did not negotiate with his parents about Radhika continuing her education after the marriage. So after they married, she did not go to take her exam and was just sitting in her husband’s house.

However, her father-in-law very much wanted her to study. He had a shop on the way to school and used to see children going to school. When he knew it was exam time and saw that Radhika was not taking her exams, he cried in front of the children. When Radhika heard this she was deeply moved and decided to take the exam. She failed twice, and again thought of quitting her studies. But her husband informed the father-in-law and asked him to fill in the forms so that she could sit the next exam. She failed again. The father-in-law counselled her to continue her studies and she did.

After the birth of her first child, she again wanted to stop her education. But her mother-in-law took charge of the household work and the child. Today Radhika has two children, aged nine and four. She is doing her graduate degree from a college in Silgadi and works on various projects in the community.

Source: Fieldwork, Salena, Doti, 2014

3.3.3 Peers as buffers

Peers may be an important source of support in the event of a social backlash, particularly if it is in response to a transgression of existing social norms. For adolescents, these may range from situations regarding love affairs and marriage to issues around clothing styles and fashion. Peers can, therefore, act as buffers, protecting each other emotionally, but also helping to motivate each other to stand up against discriminatory norms.

¹ Chaupadi is a practice where girls are kept isolated in sheds outside the house during the first four days of their menstruation cycle.

3.3.4 Family

Norms, unlike laws, are unwritten and therefore forever in a state of flux; as such, they can provide space for families to manoeuvre in order to seek opportunities for a girl's development. The families involved in the study had considerable flexibility in changing existing practices. Our findings suggest that a supportive family can provide a buffer against a social backlash and support girls to develop their capabilities even if this means going against expected behaviours (see Box 7).

However, adolescent girls are not a homogenous group and the economic status of parents and in-laws – as well as caste and ethnic identity – may affect their living conditions and life chances. Thus although gendered norms around early marriage and education are the same for all girls, their impacts may be experienced differently by girls from different economic and social groups. Similarly, sometimes the economic or socio-political conditions of a household determine their ability to challenge social norms and/or to resist or promote social change.

Box 7: The positive consequences of a supportive family

Sita is an 18-year-old married girl from Salena (Durgamadau) VDC, Doti district. She is currently pursuing her bachelor's-level education from a college in Silgadi with English as her major subject. She was born in a neighbouring VDC, from where she completed her primary and secondary education, after which time she migrated to Attaria in Kailali district with her father. Her mother and her siblings still live in Salena.

In Attaria, Sita joined a local college to continue her high school education. In the middle of grade 12, she married. It was an arranged marriage and the family she married into is the family her elder sister had previously married into. Her husband's family was keen to have her as a daughter-in-law because of her educational qualifications. None of her in-laws had studied beyond grade 8 and so they wanted to bring an educated girl into the family. She was allowed to pursue her education further even after her marriage.

Interestingly, Sita's parents had not initially planned to let her pursue her studies as they had no expectations for her. Things started to change when she got a scholarship in grade 2, as a Dalit student.² The scholarship meant that her family were now receiving money to send her to school and because she was doing well, the scholarship never stopped.

Sita's husband is in the army. He is four years older than her and has only studied up to grade 8. He usually visits her twice a year. He is very supportive and encourages her to continue her education and is also covering her college education costs. Sita believes he does not feel demeaned by his wife's level of education, but rather, feels proud of her achievement. He even pushed her to get a job as a school teacher in a local school so that she can earn her own income as well.

Her in-laws too are supportive, especially her mother-in-law, who allows her to continue with her education and work as a school teacher by giving her leeway from household duties. Her sister, who is also now her sister-in-law, does most of the household chores for her, but she is not completely free of them, and helps her sister-in-law when she can.

Sita is now a role model for her family on both sides (maternal and in-laws) and because of her educational accomplishments, her younger brother and sister are studying too and aiming to follow her path. Sita says she never fought with her parents to let her study, they were always willing. Similarly, had her parents not been so understanding, none of what she has achieved would have been possible.

Source: Fieldwork, Wayal, Doti, 2014

² The government has a special policy to give a stipend to people of Dalit and other marginalised groups

3.3.5 Communications technology

Communications technology was found to be an important driver that sensitised people to potentially harmful consequences of existing practices and introduced new ways of thinking. Local programmes run by FM radio stations are informative and raise people's awareness about harmful practices through discussion programmes or interviews. Mobile phones have undoubtedly made it more convenient for adolescents to communicate. They have helped girls to organise and keep their social network intact and share their difficulties with close friends, and have helped wives improve communication with husbands who are away from home. However, there is also some evidence that easier communication via mobile phones has had negative consequences for girls – thus, for instance, they have, on occasions, facilitated young girls' elopement and early marriage, thus putting themselves in a position which restricts the development of their other capabilities.

3.3.6 Schools

Though they do not always play a direct role in fighting discriminatory norms, schools are a critical space for boys and girls alike in terms of broadening their horizons, their career aspirations and their ideas around gender norms. Schools can also provide girls with valuable extra-curricular information and life skills on managing sexual and reproductive health and the importance of hygiene during menstruation, thus tackling widespread lack of knowledge on these key areas of girls' lives.³ Local teachers, seniors and peers are all important sources of knowledge and support, and school provides a platform for them to interact with adolescents in a social environment that is accepted by families.

3.4 Why do norms remain sticky? Inhibitors to change

The research revealed a number of reasons why some social norms remain 'sticky', including economic factors, ignorance, people's experience of the negative impact of changes, and fear of a social backlash.

3.4.1 Economics and migration

The stickiness of some norms in our study sites can partly be attributed to a stagnant economy. Both study sites are rural and the economy depends on subsistence agriculture and migrant remittances from India. Although both areas are rich in natural resources, there is a lack of infrastructure to exploit those resources; hence men move away to find work while women tend to stay behind in the family home. Because women become so burdened with daily work there is neither the time nor the economic resources to allow them a platform to even think about new ways of doing things. Besides this, women have very few opportunities for acquiring new knowledge and perspectives, so new ideas and different ways of doing things are not tried out.

At the same time, it would be reasonable to expect that when male migrants return, they bring back new ideas and innovations that could have a positive effect on discriminatory norms. But this was not found to be the case in Wayal and Salena. Perhaps because the men who migrate work mostly in menial jobs (e.g. in hotels or as guards), there is little scope for them to acquire new knowledge that they could bring home on their return. Also, since migration is seasonal, they have only short periods of exposure before coming back to the same conditions they have always known in their village. Thus, a few migrant youths we talked to adhered to existing social norms even more strongly than those who had not migrated.

3.4.2 Fear of negative outcomes and a social backlash

Fear of negative outcomes and a social backlash is another factor that inhibits change. There is a sense that people conform to certain norms or follow expected behaviours because of past negative experiences of what happened when people subverted the norm. Such people tend to hold strong religious beliefs and generally can be said to fear the consequences of modernity. Hence, if people experience even minor negative consequences from trying out new things, they become fearful and quickly return to the old or expected ways of doing things. For example, although some parents became convinced that early marriage was detrimental for their daughters but sending them to school was a good thing, when girls started to elope with boys, their parents quickly

³ Traditional local norms prevent girls from having a bath or combing their hair during the first four days of menstruation.

returned to the belief that ultimately, marriage was better for young girls than education. And, unfortunately, the fear of girls eloping with boys they may meet at school or through other friends is not unfounded.

The research found that there are some progressive families and young men and women who would like to do things differently and thereby challenge local norms. Nevertheless, they face strong criticism from within their community for doing so. When other families hear of this criticism, they too fear the same backlash, and hence stick to established norms.



Picture 3: Adolescent girls and women clearing the field after harvesting wheat. It is women who sustain agriculture in Doti.

4 What does this mean for policies and practice?

There is no magic bullet that will change discriminatory social norms and ensure gender justice and the physical and emotional wellbeing of adolescent girls and young women in Nepal. It will take a longer-term commitment to carefully designed and nuanced programmes and policy work before the beliefs, norms and values that govern the lives of Nepal's adolescent girls afford them equal life chances to adolescent boys. However, our research findings from both study sites highlight the following recommendations, which are critical to enhance the capabilities of adolescent girls and young women in Nepal.

- Ideally, all adolescents should be attending school/college or engaged in learning activities. However, for those who remain out of school, promoting income-generating activities and helping to tackle gender-based injustices such as polygamy, domestic violence and alcoholism can increase their wellbeing. In relation to income-generating activities, building infrastructure and creating local jobs will be one of the most important factors for change. Given the rich natural resources available, this is possible in both Wayal and Salena.
- Long-term and focused national interventions such as the School Sector Reform Programme need to continue and be extended to higher education.
- There should be mentoring available about what higher education can offer and different career paths, and this should be woven into other interventions to help those going to school. Mentors can include both women and men.
- While children may learn about gender discrimination at school and have progressive views about it, they are often unable to apply their learning in practice because their parents often lack awareness of gender inequalities. Encouraging parents to take part in school-related activities could not only increase their awareness around gender discrimination, but also help support the continuation of their children's education.
- Men's role in addressing discriminatory social norms should be encouraged. Given the pivotal role that men can play, both within and outside the household, they need to be engaged in discussions and awareness-raising at family and community levels so that they can become important agents for positive change and help women and girls address social injustices.
- Similarly, the parental family more generally plays an important role in shaping the lives of adolescent girls, and the extent to which a discriminatory norm may affect a girl's future rests in large part on other family members' perceptions and attitudes. Hence programmes should also target individual families and not just the community more generally.
- Programmes should take into account the difficulties older adolescent girls face while interacting with male role models. They should help build girls' confidence to interact freely while at the same time raising awareness among communities of the importance of allowing girls to interact with men in an educational or professional capacity, given that these men are often the purveyors of valuable advice on education and careers.

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- At community level, men and women, young girls and young boys should be engaged in awareness-raising and receive information around discriminatory attitudes and social norms and their impact on girls' lives, identifying collective, practical steps that can be taken to overcome these discriminatory norms.
 - Parents need to be encouraged to have a nurturing approach towards their daughters, seeing them as individuals who are equal to boys and have their own aspirations and rights. Policies and programmes need to promote a change in attitudes among parents, adolescents and wider Nepali society about what makes an ideal daughter, wife, and woman.



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