

Exploring the Challenges and Experiences of Teenage Girls in Government Schools in Kathmandu

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ABSTRACT

The research explores the socio-cultural and economic challenges, such as gender norms, household income, and the cost of schooling, that hinder girls' active participation and retention in government schools in Nepal. This paper aims to investigate how gender norms and expectations impact the educational aspirations, academic performance, and self-esteem of school-going girls in Kathmandu, with a focus on the attitudes and behaviors of teachers and peers in classrooms, using a qualitative research design. A total of 12 different students were selected through purposive sampling, and a semi-structured interview was conducted, and thematic analysis was done to generate findings. The study finds that while students, particularly girls, face financial challenges at the start of the academic year, there is also inconsistencies in access to health and hygiene support. Many girls benefit from equitable treatment in schools and supportive family environments that encourage their education. However, disparities remain in academic support and teacher behavior, especially for students with weaker foundations, often due to earlier schooling conditions in rural areas. The research found that many girls today are supported and inspired; however, they still face numerous invisible barriers, including cultural pressure, family expectations, and the way they are treated in school, at home, and in society. This study highlights the importance of socio-cultural and institutional barriers that continue to affect the educational experience of teenage girls, despite progressive policy efforts toward gender equality in Nepal's education system in the government schools.

Keywords: Socio-economic-cultural, Educational, Academic, Self-esteem, Health, School

INTRODUCTION

Teenage girls often face a unique set of challenges shaped by cultural expectations, gender norms, and socioeconomic factors. In Nepal, where gender inequality remains a persistent issue, the experience of girls in government schools is frequently influenced by structural limitations and deeply rooted social practices (Belbase 2025). Kathmandu, the capital city and a hub of educational opportunity, paradoxically reflects both progress and disparity in the context of girls' education. Teenage girls in government schools continue to encounter barriers that affect their academic performance, mental health, and overall well-being despite various governmental and non-governmental efforts to promote gender equality in education (Psaki, Haberland, Mensch, Woyczyn, 2022). The intersection of poverty, family responsibilities, and societal expectations often adds to the burden these young girls carry.

Nepal has made significant progress in school education in both urban and rural areas. Gender disparities are continuing in education, particularly in girls' education in government schools, though the enrollment of girls has improved (Belbase 2025). Girls in government schools face socio-economic and cultural challenges.

The research explores the multifaceted challenges that girls encounter in Kathmandu's government-run school system. The study aims to identify the specific challenges they face both within and outside the classroom. These include the burden of domestic responsibilities, economic constraints, and traditional norms within families and societies. The research tries to focus on the experience of girls from marginalized groups, such as those who are from lower caste, migrant, and disabled backgrounds. This study aims to uncover how gender expectations, social dynamics, and institutional practices are involved in shaping their educational journey.

The government of Nepal took an effective initiative 30 years ago to recruit female teachers in schools to encourage girls' education. The regulation of 1992 mandates that all public elementary schools hire at least one female teacher (Khatri, Timilsena, Devkota, 2024).

Objectives

To investigate the socio-cultural and economic factors that hinder girls' active participation and retention in public schools in Kathmandu. To examine how gender norms and expectations influence the educational aspirations, academic performance, and self-esteem of school-going girls in Kathmandu.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to a study conducted by Dahal T, Topping K, and Levy S. (2023), parents could not afford to send all the children to school. Although the school fee is free, there is a need for money for the uniform and other items. So, the girl child discontinued her studies and was sent for housework in some families, and the son to study. A study conducted by Neupane (2022) treating boys and girls differently based on their gender is a serious challenge to achieving gender equality, particularly in developing countries like Nepal. Such discrimination can create problems like irregularity at school, high dropout rates, poor performance, low classroom participation, and depression and stress. It may be associated with various aspects, including socio-economic status, race, ethnicity, language, and religion. Teachers play a vital role in creating a harmonious, gender-friendly, and peaceful study environment.

The challenges in the school, physical, emotional, and sexual bullying, are still prevalent, and this leads to discouragement from continuing schooling. One of the reasons for dropping out of school at an early age is early marriage and pressure to support the family economically (Samuels, Ghimire, Uprety, 2017). According to a study conducted by Jabiri & Abdallah (2024) in Tanzania, girls are overwhelmed by domestic responsibilities. Home responsibilities can cause girls to miss school, arrive late, or feel too tired to stay awake in the classroom.

According to Belbase (2025), research on the continuity of girls' education requires sustained efforts to address deeply rooted socio-cultural biases and economic inequities. Gender equality in education can pave the way for effective implementation of national policies and community-level interventions. Due to the socio-cultural beliefs, daughters are not encouraged to gain a higher level of education as they are usually oriented towards housewife activities. The society also thinks that they can be more skilled at handling homes, but they are physically and mentally weaker than males. The society's conservative social beliefs are deeply rooted. The education will be meaningful to reduce such social and cultural beliefs (Khatri, 2022). The research by Khatri & Timilsena (2024) found that girls are extremely busy with household work and fieldwork. They spend all their time on physical hard work. Furthermore, parents are still unaware of the importance of education for their daughters. (Khatri, Timilsena, Devkota, 2024) In schools, gender-based discrimination has become institutionalized and accepted indirectly, where boys and girls receive different behaviors at home from their parents and in schools from their teachers (Neupane, 2022).

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted among the teenage girls who study in the Government schools in Kathmandu Valley. The nature of the research is descriptive as well as explorative, focused on finding out the challenges and experiences of teenage students. The study is mainly based on primary sources of information, conducting face-to-face interviews with participants. The research selected 12 female students, aged 14 to 18, who were studying in four different schools in the Kathmandu Valley. The researcher chose a purposive sampling of students from different schools and selected 12 students to conduct face-to-face interviews after obtaining their consent, based on ten prepared questions regarding their academic, socioeconomic, and cultural backgrounds. The data was analyzed using thematic analysis into subthemes and reported narratively in a logical manner.

Thematic Analyses

The thematic analysis explores the socio-cultural and economic factors affecting girls' participation and retention in public schools in Kathmandu. It also examines how gender norms and expectations shaped by family, teachers,

and peers influence girls' educational aspirations, academic performance, and self-esteem within the school environment.

Socio-Cultural Factors

In Nepal, gender norms and parental attitudes greatly influence education for girls. According to participant one, education is highly valued in her household. In her words: "My parents tell me to mostly not do household chores. They ask me to study. They say that I have to study, become successful, and have a better life than they did." Even when the participant doesn't feel like attending school, her parents encourage her to go. Despite broader societal challenges, it is clear that her family supports the education of all their children.

Another participant (2) shared that she is staying with their relatives, because her parents are working abroad. The relatives do not much influence her educational aspirations, though her relatives care for most of her needs. Another participant (3) stated that though the girls are expected to do domestic work, they are discouraged from continuing their higher education due to early marriage, restrictions on socialization, etc. However, she is encouraged to complete her school studies. She stated that she has not seen any of these problems in her family or at school. She shared that she has to do some domestic work, but for only a very minimal amount of time.

One of the participants (7) shared that these days, the parents are very supportive of girls' education. Their thinking and cultural beliefs have positively changed with time. She believes that the education system, school rules, and modern awareness have played a role in modifying cultural norms regarding girls' education. However, she pointed out that in rural plain areas of Nepal, where she migrated from, early marriage for girls is still common. The dowry system is another huge problem. If the girl's family cannot provide dowry, it can lead to domestic violence and, in extreme cases, murder or even suicide. The participant strongly believes that education is a way to break these cycles, but many girls are still denied this chance due to these harmful traditions. Some parents do not set expectations for girls just because 'she is a 'girl''. Another participant (8) said that the school has built a good environment for the empowerment of girls to overcome the traditional suppression of women. According to her, females do get restricted by society and family in some way. She said, boys can do anything, but girls have to do household work and other chores around the house

All the participants have same experience when it comes to supporting their education. Some receive clear and strong support from their family, and others are not directly discouraged, but they don't receive the same level of support. Some follow the traditional expectations like doing more household chores, and others have fewer household activities and focus fully on education. Some are experiencing social pressure, like early marriages restricting girls' education, especially in rural areas. Some strongly believe that education can transform social and cultural barriers and empower the environment for girls. The study shows that a lot of progress has been made, however, the ongoing cultural problems still affect girls education in Nepal. Some changes have helped girls go to school more, but many old traditions and beliefs still create obstacles for them

Economic Factors

Participant (one) stated that the level of expenses in Kathmandu is significantly higher than in rural Nepal. Living with parents in a single room costs Rs. 5000 (\$36), which is significantly more than in a rural area. It is difficult for the family to manage with basic living costs. The participant is a scholarship holder and doesn't pay the monthly fees. But the students do pay the monthly coaching fees, which were about Rs. 800 (\$6) per month. It is challenging to manage expenses when a new academic year begins. Sometimes the family does not have enough money for the uniform or stationery, and they have to ask or borrow money from others. There is a serious financial problem when someone in the family gets sick. The admission does become a hassle, although some manage it; it doesn't hamper enrollment, attendance, or retention.

According to another participant (2), although her family's income is modest, the participant does not worry about money, as her father is highly supportive and ready to fulfill her financial needs, though there are many struggles. The participant is grateful for the support received, but knows that many girls aren't as lucky. She mentioned that financial struggles combined with dowry pressures often lead to early marriage instead of schooling for girls in her community. She also noted that education is seen as a burden by some families,

especially for daughters. To pay the rent is difficult, but her parents can manage. Another participant (3) shared that she can have a good education, and that there is often no money-related problem. She walks to school now, but used to commute by bus in her previous school since her parents shifted the rented house to a new place due to various reasons, such as children's education, better job, and family environment.

One of the participants (4), has both parents working for daily wages, and the father drinks and fights in the family, creating an unpleasant situation, especially for the girl children. When ordinary expenses come up, like sickness, they need to borrow money. Participant (5) shared that her yearly fee is around 6000/- (\$43), excluding other expenses like stationery and uniform. The family of 5 members faces financial challenges, but her father earns 20,000/-(\$142) per month.

The financial problem is the main issue for all the participants. The urban living cost is a burden compared to rural areas, and it is difficult to cover the essentials like uniforms, stationery, and health-related problems. Even though the scholarships are provided, there are still extra academic costs and financial stress for the family. Whenever unexpected expenses arise, borrowing money for non-tuition expenses is difficult for the girls studying in government schools. It is also a struggle for the girls when their parents are addicted to alcoholism, and when the family is involved in domestic violence, dowry demands, and pressure from modern society for living expenses, which creates mental strain. The personal motivation and family prioritization of schooling is impressive, though resources are scarce.

Institutional and Intersecting Factors

There are two types of scholarships: merit-based and need-based. The merit-based scholarships are for a few top students in their studies. The need-based scholarships are provided to those with poor financial backgrounds. The participant did not receive a merit-based scholarship, but she received a need-based scholarship. The teachers teach everyone equally without any caste or gender discrimination. She also studies without any experience of partiality. The school provides sanitary pads to girls on a monthly basis. In some schools, medicine is free.

The food is freely supplied by the government. Some of the schools have no funds, and they do not serve free meals to the students. Most of the research participants have not paid for any travelling expenses because the school is close to their homes and they walk to school. Some of them walk a couple of kilometers to reach school.

The participants shared that their school has basic facilities for girls, such as a sanitary pad vending machine, but many girls feel shy about talking about or using them. It is clear from the research that some families continue to believe girls don't need education, which limits their opportunities. The schools provide sanitary pads, but with limitations. There are also sick rooms for girls where the girls can go and take rest when they are unwell. The girls are hesitant to talk about their menstrual stigma. It seems policy alone is insufficient unless supported by community initiation and equitable resource distribution.

Need-based scholarships are accessible to students from economically poor backgrounds. It shows that the institutions are making an effort towards economic inclusivity. However, merit-based scholarship is limited and only provided to high academic achievers. It is also noticed that teachers treat students equally, which is a strong sign of institutional commitment to non-discrimination. The institution cares about the health of the students by providing medicine, food, and caring for the sick. Another point is that not all schools have sufficient funds for providing free food.

School environment

The participant claims that the school environment is very friendly. The teachers teach well, although she is not able to grasp the concepts easily. The participants receive free lunch from the school whenever the school provides. She does not know the specifics, but supposedly "the municipality gives money for food". Another participant (9) shared that school lunch is provided until class 5, and students have to arrange their own lunch from class 6 onwards.

There is fairness among male and female students. Teachers, when scolding, give equal punishments without any gender discrimination. Teachers give equal opportunities to both genders. Students are disciplined. Girls enjoy the company of girls than mingling with boys in the co-ed schools.

The teachers are described as impartial, treating boys and girls equally in classroom management and participation in the school. The school maintains gender fairness in both discipline and opportunities. However, some gender-based separation occurs, with girls preferring to socialize with their own gender. Many students in the school are migrants who belong to the Madheshi caste group, from the border area of India. Many speak Maithili and Hindi, and follow the culture of India. Another discovery is that a degree of tension appears to exist, particularly with regard to boys being more unruly and less responsive to female authority, hinting at underlying cultural and social biases that may affect classroom behavior.

Home environment

Many divorced families go through a difficult time at home. The participant lives with her mother and her elder brother, who is now in grade 12. Her mother and brother do not really discuss family matters with her. Hence, her lack of information about her parents' jobs and the reason for their divorce. Another participant (10) shared that her mother treats both siblings equally and fairly. The girl supports manual work at home. However, on school days, she does not need to work at home. When both her mother and brother are sick, she does the whole household work. Every Saturday, her brother and she alternate doing household chores. Some children reach home very late in the evening due to compulsory tuition. Another participant (11) said that she needs help with household work every day.

Families face practical and emotional challenges. It is important to have open family communication to avoid confusion and isolation. Healthy family dialogue could help the girl children with their emotional well-being and help them understand family situations. Also, a balanced and fair family schedule related to their support can help the girls focus more on their studies and life. Domestic expectations impact the child's education if there is no flexibility or balanced structure.

Educational Aspirations and Academic Performance

Some female students have clear goals: one of the participants (6) aspires to be a nurse. She believes that if girls are given the same opportunities as boys, they can do just as well. She is motivated and studies with full effort despite challenges. She is known to be talented and hardworking, and teachers often give her attention because of her good performance. However, she feels concerned that students who are less confident or struggling are often overlooked. She said, "Sometimes, teachers only focus on the talented ones, but those who are trying hard also need motivation." She believes that equal encouragement is important so that every student feels valued.

Another participant (12) wants to be a lawyer. She is well supported by her mother. She wants to choose that path because she has seen people around her who are good lawyers. She said that boys are good at sports. She thinks that even though there are equal opportunities, boys grow up with fewer responsibilities and more freedom. They also dominate in classes and fields. Girls simply will feel embarrassed to even start something because the boys seem to be already proficient.

There is a lack of high ambitions and career aspirations among some. Those who study get more attention from the teachers. One of the participants has no particular future goal. Another one says that she wants to be a worker in a shop and be employed. Participant four shared that migration to Kathmandu helped her studies, unlike learning in her village, which is 500 kilometers away from the valley.

Overall students are comparatively motivated, hardworking, and goal-oriented. Teachers are supportive, especially those who perform well in the class. It is also shared by the participants that struggling students are often ignored, and teachers give them less attention. The girls believe that equal encouragement is essential, so that they can prove that they are as capable as boys. It is also noticed that the parents are supportive of girls' education. Due to male domination, some girls are hesitant to try new things, and they feel that boys dominate in class, sports, and fields. Some students in the school have less motivation and less career ambition. The

research reveals that migration helps the students to have better educational opportunities than in the village.

Self-Esteem and Confidence:

Although the school does not lay any expectations based on gender, society and family do have gender-based expectations shared by a participant. However, she is encouraged by her family to regularly attend school, and her family supports her education, which builds up her self-esteem and confidence. Participant number (5) has taken on group leadership roles and says this helped boost her confidence.

Another participant shared her experience; her confidence was the highest when she was studying in a school for girls. When she changed her school to co-ed, her confidence dropped due to the boys in the school. Boys are likely to do things that they like without thinking about consequences. She said that girls still lack confidence to speak up about their needs. Another person shared that the supportive learning atmosphere has inspired her to engage more in class, ask questions, and improve herself. She observes that her increased classroom involvement in various subjects is leading to progress. This allows her to feel that she is just as capable and intelligent as the boys in her class. One of the participants (3) said that being a boy is nice. Boys can freely roam in public and can stay out late; they do not get scolded. They also don't get discriminated against.

Family support is impressive for many participants. The family encouragement helps the girls with their self-esteem and confidence. There are female students who think that class leadership helps them boost their confidence. It is also noticed that many girls are struggling to speak up for themselves. A few of the research participants feel that they are equally capable and intelligent in the class. Some believe that gender privilege is seen in the school, which makes the girls less confident.

Teachers and Peer Attitudes

Not all teachers treat students equally; there are instances where they show a preference between boys and girls (For example, in some intraclass competition, such as a quiz or others, "*kta haru le jitcha ni yesma*" or "*tyo kta pratham hune bidhyarhi ho*" and then adding if the girls can beat that male topper in studies or not. Such statements may present an egoistic challenge to the empowerment of girls, but for these young girls, they serve as a source of discouragement. They can become demotivated quite easily. A research participant shared that her teachers are generally fair. She did mention a single incident where a teacher hit her hands, causing them to bleed, but the teacher apologized. She feels comfortable asking questions and sharing opinions in class.

The participant shared that there is favoritism towards male students, and some teachers think that boys perform better. It is important to empower the students without any discrimination. Discrimination leads to demotivation of the students, and some female students even feel discouraged. These also lead to inferiority in extracurricular activities and academic performances. Teaching is not just about teaching the subjects, but also providing holistic formation. It is important to teach values and virtues and create a teacher-student relationship in the school. Unfair treatment and harmful practices are not a part of students' formation in the schools. The teacher's attitude in the class, whether biased or supportive, or inconsistent, significantly influences students' motivation, dedication, and commitment, especially for girls.

Classroom Environment

A participant shared that in her class, leaders are appointed on a timely basis. There are 2 class leaders in her class, one male and the other is female, and the roles are rotated every month so that everyone gets a chance to become the class monitor. She said that this shows a kind of gender quality in the classroom. As for personal development, such roles are a good way to develop leadership skills and other skills. There are not many activities in the school. The teachers come and teach but there is hardly any classroom activities, group work, or an opportunity to reflect on concepts. Another participant (5) observed that many girls hesitate to take part in class leadership or speak up due to fear of judgment. She believes the classroom can be a more inclusive space if teachers and peers create an environment of trust and equality.

In most cases, all the students are treated the same, and the school has a friendly environment for the development of children. One issue is that the leadership qualities of these young girls are often stifled by the boys. They struggle to assert themselves since faculty members primarily select boys for volunteer positions and management programs. During group projects, leadership roles are equally distributed, though she noted girls often take the lead. In her words: “The boys in our class are not very smart, so girls automatically assume leadership roles, but usually if we have four groups, two leaders are girls and two are boys.” She is confident that if she had ever faced gender-based favoritism, the school administration would have addressed it if anything.

In terms of extracurriculars, she notes that opportunities are provided to all students equally. The male class representative of her class is assigned most of the physical work, such as moving chairs, but the female class representative is equally active in other activities. When provided with opportunities, the female students make use of them readily, while the male students tend to be more laid back.

FINDINGS

- There is a financial difficulty at the beginning of the academic year, especially regarding school fees and uniform. If anyone gets sick, there is a problem with treatment. It does affect the teenage girls.
- Some of the schools give sanitary pads freely, while others do not have the facility. Some schools have room for rest when they get sick.
- No partiality based on gender, caste, wealth, non-residents or residents, etc. Everyone is treated equally.
- When families value the importance of education and schools strive to maintain equity, even students facing economic challenges can succeed both academically and socially.
- Despite financial constraints and a weak academic foundation due to early schooling conditions, the student demonstrates strong motivation and a supportive family environment.
- Schools provide a relatively fair and inclusive atmosphere, with some resources and scholarships available, though improvements could be made in consistency and support systems.
- Students have faced no problems in their studies due to socio-economic factors and don't encounter any obstacles caused by gender norms. The parents and guardians are at home, supportive of girls' education, which encourages consistency in girls' education.
- There are instances where students who are not strong academically are punished and ridiculed by teachers and other students in the school.
- Many of the participants migrated from village schools, and they have a weak foundation in subjects, especially mathematics and science, making them less confident in the school.

Limitations:

It is worth mentioning that the students seemed quite reserved, but still responded and participated in the interview to the best of their capabilities. However, one might consider the possibility that they may have faced subtle discrimination without recognizing it yet. The research is conducted only in Government schools in the Kathmandu valley. The sampling is small, and there is a possibility of conducting research on a similar topic.

DISCUSSION

According to the Nepalese socio-cultural context, girls are inferior to boys. Girls are often viewed as a burden, raised for the benefit of others, and expected to become housewives. Boys are empowered (Belbase 2025). The present study shows that girls are getting a lot of encouragement from the school as well as from the family for their education. However, they are expected to do housework and not get the same treatment that boys receive

from many families and some educators. Many of the government school children are migrants from the hills and the plain areas of Nepal. Some of these men in their families, drink in the evenings and fight with family members, creating an unpleasant environment for all. Some of these incidents affect children, especially girls. According to Uprety Durga (2024), students left the class in the past, but now there is a medical health service and sanitary pads available in schools. Girls take pads and spell out without hesitation, and do not leave school during their menstrual period. The current research study reveals that the availability and accessibility of menstrual hygiene and health management materials at school support and promote girls' retention in school.

A few research participants shared that boys are smarter in the class in subjects like mathematics. A study conducted by Elizabeth M. King and Rebecca (2015) found that girls are behind boys in maths. Also, the study discovered that male or female teachers should use gender-sensitive pedagogy. The present study discovered that the children shared that their financial support was received from their father in some cases, and their mother in a similar way. A study conducted by Mueni Mutuku M. Njeru Enos and Mburugu Edward (2020) found that financial support in high school education fees was paid by both the parents.

In a study conducted by Sheykhjan T.M, Jabari, K. Rajeswari (2014), students reported that males seem to have higher self-esteem than girls. In the present study, some participants shared that boys are smarter than girls. The study reveals that a positive school and family environment helps the students' self-esteem and confidence in classroom participation. Similarly, a research study by Alkhutaba M, Alnajjar K, and Al-Qeyam F.R. (2022) found that family issues have an important role in affecting students' self-esteem.

CONCLUSION

The study shows that the schools in the valley have a very good environment for the growth of students. They give equal opportunities to all the students, and the girls are doing well in these settings. However, the traditional resistance blocks the growth of our girls. The girls are bringing about social change where no gender is smaller than others, and no person is regarded different than others. When analyzed, we see progress towards equality and equity of opportunities in schooling, which gives hope for a positive outlook.

This research shows both the challenges and positive developments in the educational experience of girls in Nepali government schools. Despite financial constraints and weak academic foundation, the students demonstrate strong motivation and benefit from supportive family environments. The school appears to provide a relatively fair and inclusive atmosphere, with some resources and scholarships available, though improvements could be made in consistency and support systems. When families value education and schools make an effort to maintain equity, even students facing economic challenges can thrive academically and socially.

The outcome of the research reminds us that change is happening, but slowly. If we want to see a truly equal society, we must not just support girls who are already doing well but also lift those who are struggling in silence and provide them with equal opportunity. The research outcomes show that talent is not limited by gender, but opportunities often are. Our education system is not complete until every girl, whether in Kathmandu or in Terai, feels safe, supported, and grown.

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