

GAGE Digest

# Adolescent girls' capabilities in Nepal

A synopsis of the evidence

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## Introduction

Nepal is a small mountainous country situated between China and India. Still recovering from a devastating earthquake in 2015, the country is home to over 26 million people—who represent 125 different ethnic groups (UNDP, 2018). The country's economy is heavily reliant on remittances and just over one-fifth of Nepalis live below the poverty line. Despite declining fertility, the country's population is young. About one-quarter are adolescents between the ages of 10 and 19 (Ministry of Health and Population, 2017). Nepal has a highly decentralised government, which encourages local communities to set their own priorities and therefore opens up interesting ways of working with young people.

This evidence digest provides an overview of what we know about adolescent girls (see Box 1) in the context of Nepal, including the ways in which they experience the second decade of life and how programming designed to support their development trajectories impacts their lives. The digest also identifies what the key evidence gaps are, and highlights how Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) and other research programmes can best contribute to a robust evidence base to support evidence-informed policy and programming.

Figure 1: Map of Nepal



### Box 1: Why adolescent girls?

Adolescence has powerful impacts on children's capabilities – in part because of the physical transformations wrought by puberty, which are considered second only to those experienced in infancy and early childhood in terms of their scope and speed, and in part because of how children's place in the family and broader community shifts as they approach adulthood. While acknowledging that these processes affect girls and boys equally, GAGE focuses most directly on girls because of the ways adolescent transitions more sharply curtail their capabilities.

Over the course of the second decade of life, adolescents undergo significant physical, cognitive and emotional changes. As girls enter and progress through adolescence, the gendered norms of their socio-cultural environments also begin to play a heightened role in shaping their trajectories, with the years of early adolescence found to be especially important because of the ways in which social norms start to become both more rigidly enforced and more personally salient. Critically for girls in the Global South, the years of early adolescence, rather than expanding their worlds, often see them made smaller as girls have to leave comparatively free childhoods and are forced down the gendered adult pathways of their local environments. Girls who have begun to aspire to a world different from those of their mothers and their grandmothers find as their bodies evidence maturity that they are too often required to leave school and marry, abandoning not only their educational and professional plans but also mobility and friendships. Pressures related to domestic and care work burdens, sexual purity and family honour and heightened risks of sexual and gender-based violence combine to limit girls' possibilities in ways that often have lifelong consequences.

## Methodology

One of the four knowledge-generation work-streams of the GAGE research programme is synthesising the existing evidence of what works globally to enhance adolescent girls' capabilities. Two of the products produced over the course of the first year of our work were about adolescent girls in Nepal. The first Nepali Evidence Mapping, which was based on 300 relevant studies, brought together existing evidence on the wellbeing of Nepali girls between the ages of 10 and 19 (Cunningham and D'Arcy, 2017). It was organised around the capability domains laid out in GAGE's conceptual framework – education and learning; bodily autonomy, integrity, and freedom from violence; sexual and reproductive health, health and nutrition; psychosocial wellbeing; voice and agency; and economic empowerment – and sought to lay out what is known and not known about the recent progress girls have made and the vulnerabilities they still face. The second Nepali Evidence Mapping, which was largely based on 56 impact studies and evaluations, looked at girl-focused interventions and impact assessments and sought to tease out what types of programming work best for what kinds of girls in which contexts (Stavropoulou with Gupta-Archer, 2017). Both were based on systematic searches of Google Scholar, academic and development databases, and websites of organisations known to be active in Nepal.

Our Evidence Mappings found that the literature on Nepali adolescent girls' capabilities covers a breadth of areas, with the greatest evidence on education, child marriage, and physical health – and the gender norms that shape them. However, it concluded that most of what we know focuses only on older girls, and sometimes only older girls who are married, or fails to disaggregate between girls of different ages, ethnic groups, etc. We know very little, for example, about girls who are younger, lower caste or extremely poor. We also know very little about girls' psychosocial needs or whether they are beginning to translate their improved education into life choices of their own choosing. Evidence on what types of interventions work for girls is especially thin. While child clubs are a common programme modality in Nepal – and reach adolescent girls and boys at scale – they are not overly gender-sensitive and we do not know how they might be combined with other types of interventions, aimed at parents and communities, to open more space for girls' growing capabilities.

## Evidence across capability domains and gaps

### Education and learning

- **Nepali girls are now more likely than boys to be enrolled in both primary and secondary school.**
- **Educational quality is low in Nepal, which impacts girls more than boys because the latter are more likely to be sent to higher quality private schools.**
- **Girls' are far less likely than boys to complete secondary school and pass the school-leaving exam.**

A large body of evidence (118 sources) documents the tremendous progress that Nepal has made towards achieving gender equality in education over the course of the last generation. It also highlights the ways in which girls continue to be disadvantaged relative to their male peers.

While 85% of the mothers of today's adolescents never had the opportunity to go to school (Amin et al. 2014a), the most recent government figures report that gender parity has been achieved at both primary and secondary levels. In 2014, girls' net primary enrolment rate was 94% (versus 95% for boys) and girls' net secondary enrolment rate was 62% (versus 58% for boys). Furthermore, while girls aged 15-24 are significantly less likely to be literate than their male peers (80% versus 90%) (World Bank, 2017), recent progress towards parity means that girls in Nepal are now appreciably more likely to complete lower-secondary school than boys (86% versus 79% for boys). These figures are particularly remarkable given that girls continue to lack educational role models – only 22% of secondary teachers are female (versus 42% of primary teachers) (World Bank, 2017). They also speak to Nepal's potential for more rapid future progress given that schools help equip girls with the tools and capacity to overcome discriminatory norms and practices (Ghimire and Samuels, 2014b; Parker et al., 2014)

Despite progress, there remains significant scope for improvement – in terms of both educational quality more generally and gender equality more specifically. In addition to the fact that only about 38% of children who begin grade one are still in school in grade 10 (Ministry of Education, 2016), schooling in Nepal is generally regarded as poor in terms of quality, especially for low-income, ethnic minority children living in disadvantaged

regions of the country (World Bank, 2015). Indeed, poor learning environments and outcomes in government schools have resulted in a thriving private sector, which now educates about 20% of Nepali students (Amin et al., 2014a). Privately educated students are far more likely to pass the School Leaving Certificate exam which is given at the end of 10th grade and is required in order to continue on to higher secondary school (pass rates of 90% versus 34% in 2015) (Ministry of Education, 2016). This in turn is creating a two-tier social system, with the better-off students at English-language private schools having access to significantly greater employment and social opportunities (Parker et al., 2013).

Nepali girls, however, even when they come from families who can afford private school, are less likely to have access to the top tier of this system. While their parents have bought into the notion that girls should be educated, regardless of the proverb, 'educating a girl is like pouring water into sand', parents are significantly more likely to invest in higher quality private schools for their sons than for their daughters – who are not generally expected to become earners but rather become part of their husbands' families upon marriage (Frost et al., 2013). One result of this is that far more boys than girls pass the School Leaving Certificate exam. In 2015, 54% of boys who sat the exam passed. Only 41% of girls passed (Ministry of Education, 2016).

In addition to being less likely to benefit from comparative wealth, Nepali girls are also especially likely to be disadvantaged by economic hardship. The 2014 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) showed that literacy of young women (aged 15-24) was poorest among the middle wealth quintile (73%, compared to 80% for the poorest and 98% for the richest) (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2015). This may reflect the fact that middle-income girls lack both household resources and access to government programming. Evaluation of the Nepal Poverty Alleviation Fund supports this argument. It found that girls' school enrolment was particularly sensitive to programme participation. While the enrolment of all children aged 6-15 increased 14%, girls' enrolment increased 21% (Parajuli et al., 2012).

Even when girls are enrolled, their education is deprioritised by their families, who leave them with the lion's share of domestic chores due to social norms which see household labour as 'women's work'. The baseline study for the UNICEF Adolescent Development and Participation programme (ADAP) showed that girls do

more chores than boys – and that they are more likely to cite household demands on their time as a reason for dropping out of school than are their brothers and male peers (Amin et al., 2014a, 2014b; Gaible, 2015). While boys are more likely to drop out of school than girls, they typically do so because that are not interested in school, whereas girls drop out because of chores and parental disapproval (ibid.).

Girls in some regions and from some castes are particularly disadvantaged in terms of educational access and outcomes. For example, girls in the Terai, where child marriage is especially common, are significantly more likely than their peers in other regions to be out of school. Of those aged 10-14, 25% are neither in school nor working (Amin et al., 2014b). Older girls are even less likely to be in school. Nearly half of girls aged 15-19 from the Terai are out of both school and work. Evidence also suggests that Dalit girls continue to face particularly high educational barriers. Not only do they, like their male peers, struggle with discrimination and classes that are not in their native tongue, but their parents tend to prioritise their brothers' schooling and they face particularly high odds of child marriage (Damodar, 2015).

Girls' access to written information is limited. While about one-third of older adolescent (15-19 years) girls and boys listen to the radio at least once a week, and about half watch TV, boys are almost twice as likely as girls to read the newspaper once a week (18% vs. 10%) (Ministry of Health and Population, 2017). Girls' more limited reading time may reflect their greater time poverty. Research has found that girls and women sleep fewer hours, have less leisure time and spend less time on self-care, social and cultural activities compared to boys and men (ActionAid, 2013).

Girls' access to technology is mixed. On the one hand, they are only half as likely as boys to use the internet, likely because mobility restrictions keep girls from visiting internet cafes. Of those aged 15-19, only 31% of girls—compared to 63% of boys—have ever used the internet (Ministry of Health and Population, 2017). Girls' mobile phone use, on the other hand, is higher. Almost 50% of those aged 15-19 report having used a mobile phone within the previous 24 hours (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2015) and nearly 59% report that they own a phone (Ministry of Health and Population, 2017). The implications of girls' phone use are varied. On the one hand, mobile phones have been a means of coping with or addressing discriminatory norms by helping girls have

greater say (Ghimire and Samuels, 2014a). On the other hand, the ease of communication they afford has been found to make it easier for girls to elope before they reach adulthood (ibid.).

The evidence on Nepali girls' education is quite good overall, highlighting progress over time and in comparison to boys and also exploring the complex links between education and social norms and other capability areas, such as physical wellbeing and bodily integrity. However, there is very little disaggregated data available which speaks to the educational opportunities and outcomes of the most disadvantaged girls, such as those from extremely poor or Dalit families. There also appears to be limited information available about girls' participation in technical and vocational or non-formal education.

## Bodily autonomy, integrity and freedom from violence

- **While child marriage has been declining rapidly in recent years, 40% of young women between the ages of 20 and 24 were married as children and child-driven 'love' marriages are becoming more common.**
- **Although sexual harassment ('eve-teasing') and gender-based violence are known to be rampant, there has been very limited research capturing the experiences of adolescent girls.**

Our Evidence Mapping uncovered 90 sources addressing the threats that Nepali girls face in regard to their bodily autonomy. However, while it concludes that girls are vulnerable to all sorts of violence, including intimate partner violence (IPV) and trafficking, only child marriage is well researched.

The legal age of marriage in Nepal is 20, for both men and women, but girls and boys may marry as early as 18 with parental consent (Plan Nepal et al., 2012). Despite this, child marriage remains rampant.<sup>1</sup> Recent surveys have found that more than one-quarter of girls

between the age of 15 and 19 are already married (Amin et al. (2014b) report 28% and the 2016 Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) reports 27% (Ministry of Health and Population, 2017). Girls in the Central Terai, where rugged geography works to slow the spread of information and contribute to girls' poor mobility, were especially likely to marry as children. The median age for first marriage in that region is only 16.7 years (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2014). Girls with no education are also particularly vulnerable to child marriage. Among girls aged 15-19, 63% of those with no education were already married, compared to only 13% of those with higher education (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2015). There is also evidence that suggests that caste is an important driver of child marriage in Hindu communities, with the most marginalised girls from lower castes the most likely to marry as children (Karim et al., 2016).

While rates of child marriage remain high in Nepal, especially among certain population groups and in some regions, recent national progress has been remarkable and is likely to accelerate given that the government endorsed in 2016 a National Strategy to End Child Marriage by 2030. The 2016 DHS found that while 7% of young women aged 20-24 were married by the age of 15, only 4% of adolescent girls between the age of 15 and 19 were married by that age. It also found declines in marriage by the age of 18. 'Only' 40% of young women between the ages of 20 and 24 were married as children—compared to 45% of those aged 25-29 (Ministry of Health and Population, 2017). Declines have been particularly significant in urban areas and among the more educated and less poor (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2015).

Research highlights the centrality of gender norms in driving child marriage, with parents' and elders' desire to control girls' sexuality usually key to marriage timing (Karim et al., 2016; Khatiwada et al., 2013; Ghimire and Samuels, 2014b). However, it also notes economic considerations. The poorest families may view marriage as a way to reduce household costs and shift the 'burden' of raising girls onto their marital families, who are especially likely to accept that burden when they need the household labour that adolescent girls can provide (Bajracharya and Amin, 2012; Plan Nepal et al., 2012). Poorer girls are also more vulnerable because they are especially likely to be out of school; this alone raises their odds of child marriage (Ghimire and Samuels, 2014b; Valente, 2011;

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<sup>1</sup> Nepali boys are far less likely to marry as children than girls. Recent government figures report that 0.5% of adolescent boys and 1% of girls aged 10-14 were already married. This rises to 7% of adolescent boys and 23% of adolescent girls aged 15-19 (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2014). The baseline for UNICEF's ADAP programme found that overall girls are four times as likely to be married before the legal age than boys (Amin et al., 2014a).

Bajracharya and Amin, 2012; Plan Asia Regional Office, 2013). The continuing practice of dowry, which is illegal and punishable with both fines and imprisonment, also contributes to child marriage, as younger girls sometimes require a smaller dowry (Ghimire and Samuels, 2014b; Plan Nepal et al., 2012; Bajracharya and Amin, 2012; Plan Asia Regional Office, 2013)

Notably, while the vast majority of child marriages continue to be arranged, research from the last few years has noted an increasing trend for girls and boys to choose their own partners – and child marriage. In an environment in which child marriage is ‘deeply rooted’ (Khatiwada et al., 2013) and marriage acts as a key marker of adulthood (Plan Asia Regional Office, 2013), girls as young as 13 are eloping in order to marry their ‘first love’ (Plan Nepal et al., 2012; Ghimire and Samuels, 2014b).

Evidence about sexual and gender-based violence is far thinner than evidence about child marriage – and primarily focused on the experiences of women rather than adolescent girls. However, available evidence indicates that girls are vulnerable to violence both within the household and in the larger community. For example, the UNICEF ADAP baseline study found that one in six married girls between the ages of 15 and 19 reported physical violence at the hands of their husbands (Amin et al., 2014a). One in three reported sexual violence. The study also found high levels of acceptance of violence within marriage. When asked whether women should tolerate violence in order to keep harmony in the family, 46% of adolescent boys and 42% of adolescent girls said yes (Amin et al., 2014a). Another study with young women aged 15-24 showed that young women in rural areas were more likely to experience physical and sexual violence in their lifetime (Lamichhane et al., 2011).

Girls also experience high levels of violence from their mothers-in-law. The most recent MICS found that nearly two-thirds of women believe that mothers-in-law are justified in threatening daughters-in-law when they (1) go out without permission, (2) neglect the children, (3) argue, (4) refuse to obey, (5) do not bring dowry or (6) do not complete their work on time (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2015).

Violence against women and girls is also common outside of the household. A Plan International study (2015) found that of those students who reported experiencing violence at school in the last six months, 42% reported school staff as the perpetrator. Another study, exploring the factors involved in sexual harassment of migrant workers in Kathmandu, found that one in 10 young women had experienced sexual harassment or coercion, with perpetrators being co-workers, boyfriends, employers and relatives (Puri and Cleland, 2007).

Nepali girls are also vulnerable to trafficking, with up to 12,000 girls trafficked each year, mostly to India – at a median age of 17 (Silverman et al., 2007). Ethnic minority and rural girls appear especially vulnerable (Kaufman and Crawford, 2011; Gurung, 2014) and younger girls are more likely to be targeted for sex-trafficking because they are less likely to have sexually transmitted diseases (Joshi and Swahnberg, 2012) and are more easily controlled.

Two gaps in the evidence regarding girls’ bodily integrity stand out most clearly. First, while the experiences of adolescent girls are often subsumed in the larger category of women, with little research focused specifically on their needs, the youngest adolescent girls are all but invisible. Most of what we know about child marriage and violence against women and girls is for girls aged 15-19; younger girls, where they are ‘counted’ at all, appear to be seen solely as children – and grouped with their male age mates – rather than as girls. Second, while ‘eve teasing’ (sexual harassment) is known to be quite common in Nepal, we found no research addressing the ways in which it shapes adolescent girls’ daily lives and limits their capabilities.

## Sexual and reproductive health, health and nutrition

- **Taboos surrounding sexuality in general – and girls' sexuality in particular – are strong in Nepal. Girls have little access to sexuality education, face a variety of restrictive customs about menstruation, and are unlikely to use contraception, even when they are married.**
- **While existing evidence suggests that girls are highly unlikely to engage in premarital sex, there is concern that adolescent sexual practices may be shifting in tandem with their dating practices – leaving younger, unmarried girls at high risk of pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).**

The large body of evidence (121 sources) regarding Nepali girls' physical health revolves primarily around the risk of early pregnancy and focuses on older, married adolescents. It notes that social norms that devalue girls and stigmatise their sexuality leave them at risk in a number of ways.

In Nepal, premarital sex for girls is highly stigmatised and quite rare – although rates show considerable variability and range from less than 1% for girls aged 15-19 (Ministry of Health and Population, 2017) to 12% in a survey of female factory workers aged 14-19 (Puri and Cleland, 2006). There is concern, given taboos, that surveys do not adequately capture changing sexual practices in Nepal, which may be shifting in line with emerging dating practices (Regmi et al., 2011).

Given social norms, research on adolescent sexual behaviour is almost exclusively limited to married girls. It shows that while contraception is offered by 95% of all health facilities, only 23% of girls aged 15-19 use it (Ministry of Health and Population, 2017), only one-third of non-users know that they can access it locally (Aguilar and Cortez, 2015) and unmet need (primarily for spacing) is nearly 35% (Ministry of Health and Population, 2017). Research has found that adolescents face a variety of barriers to contraceptive access, including – for those aged 13-18 – embarrassment and girls' lack of power and skill to negotiate with their partners (Jha et al., 2010). Adolescent knowledge about abortion, which is legal on demand in all circumstances up to 12 weeks and considerably later in some circumstances, is similarly limited. One study found that only 40% of girls and young

women between the ages of 15 and 24 knew that abortion was legal (Adhikari, 2016).

Despite these barriers, and the fact that around one-third of births to married adolescent mothers are mistimed or unwanted (Aguilar and Cortez, 2015), rates of adolescent pregnancy are dropping in tandem with child marriage. The youngest girls are showing the steepest declines. The 2016 DHS found that only .6% of girls between the ages of 15 and 19 had given birth by 15 (compared to 1.1% of young women aged 20-24). Pregnancy in later adolescence remains more common. Just over 16% of those aged 20-24 had given birth by the age of 18 (compared to 19% for those aged 25-29). Overall, the 2016 DHS reports that approximately 14% of girls have begun childbearing<sup>2</sup> before age 18—and 36% before age 20 (Ministry of Health and Population, 2017). The most recent MICS found similar rates of adolescent pregnancy, with 14% of girls aged 15-19 having begun childbearing (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2015). Girls with no education or from poor or rural households continue to be the most likely to become young mothers (Khatiwada et al., 2013; Central Bureau of Statistics, 2015) and the least likely to use maternity services. For example, compared to those married at the age of 18, those married at 14 are only half as likely to have a skilled birth attendant or to deliver in a facility (Godha et al., 2016).

While schools provide students in 6th through 10th grades with basic information on sexual and reproductive health (SRH), including content on reproductive biology, family planning, STDs and safe motherhood, evidence suggests that most students are unsatisfied with the SRH information provided and would like to know more (Shrestha et al., 2013). It also suggests that adolescents need more SRH education. Grade 9 and 10 textbooks have been found to be inadequate in terms of teaching about HIV and AIDS and other STDs (Mahat and Pradhan, 2011) and a study of girls aged 11-17 found that only 15% had a 'high' knowledge score about SRH and nearly 30% had 'low' knowledge scores (Shakya, 2013). Poor SRH education is problematic given that students with the most information and whose teachers and parents are more supportive and involved in sexual education had more positive attitudes towards abstinence and

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2 This means that they were either pregnant or had given birth when they were surveyed.



intentions towards safer sex – both critical as dating and sexual practices shift (Shrestha et al., 2013).

Taboos regarding menstruation in Nepal are widespread and deeply held. Fortunately, they are also improving. Although a 2009 study found that nearly 40% of girls were not informed about menstruation before they started their periods (Posner et al., 2009), more recent evidence suggests that 90% of girls know about the menstrual cycle (Amin et al., 2014b; see also WaterAid, 2009). Furthermore, while just a few years ago girls in some regions of Nepal were quite likely to be confined to separate rooms in their homes – or even animal sheds – while they were menstruating, this practice of *chaupadi* is becoming less common. The 2010 MICS found that half of girls were confined to a different room during their periods. The 2014 MICS, on the other hand, found that just one quarter were confined to their rooms – and only 3% stay in an animal shed or eat different food (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2015). Even so, nearly 60% of menstruating girls between the ages of 15 and 19 are still made to avoid social gatherings (ibid.). Girls also continue to have limited access to sanitary supplies, with 85% reporting using cotton cloths rather than commercial products (Amin et al., 2014b) and girls in some areas reporting that their periods cause them to miss school (Gaible, 2015).

Chronic food insecurity persists in parts of Nepal, where over half of all households (51%) lack access to food year-round (Ministry of Health and Population et al., 2012b). Compared to older women, adolescent girls appear to be especially disadvantaged. The 2016 DHS found that just over 30% of girls aged 15-19 had low body mass indices (under 18.5) and 44% were anaemic (Ministry of Health and Population, 2017). Other studies have found that 32% of girls between the ages of 9 and 16 are underweight and 21% are stunted (Mansur et al., 2015) and that girls aged 10-19 are far more likely than their male peers to be anaemic (78% versus 52%) (Baral and Onta, 2009). How much of this is related to food intake and how much is related to parasites is unknown, but an older study found that girls were more likely than boys to have worms (49% versus 34%), probably because they were responsible for collecting water (Rijal et al., 2001).

Given that recent research has found that child marriage is increasingly driven by adolescents themselves, there is reason to suspect that adolescent sexual practices are poised for significant change. Given

this, there is a glaring lack of evidence regarding the beliefs and behaviours of younger and unmarried adolescents. There is also little evidence about how to improve girls' contraception uptake and nutritional outcomes.

## Psychosocial wellbeing

- **Nepali girls tend to have more limited mobility and smaller social networks than their male peers.**
- **Girls are more likely to be sad and depressed than boys, probably because social norms limit their control over their own lives.**

Clear in our Evidence Mapping, which uncovered only 22 sources addressing girls' psychosocial wellbeing, little is known about girls' happiness and mental health. Existing evidence, however, suggests that girls are far more vulnerable than boys, in large part because of the ways in which social norms limit their lives.

For example, compared to boys, girls aged 10-24 are more likely to be sad and depressed (12% versus 9%) and less confident (43% versus 36%), and are more than three times more likely to have considered suicide (19% versus 6%) (Ministry of Health and Population, 2012a) – this in a country with the seventh highest suicide rate in the world and where suicide is already the leading cause of death in girls and women of childbearing age (Cousins, 2016). Furthermore, among groups of vulnerable children, such as child soldiers (Kohrt et al., 2008) or the homeless (Ojha et al., 2013), girls are more likely than boys to experience emotional difficulty.

Girls' distress appears related to their smaller social networks – which are due to their limited mobility – and the fact that girls have fewer adults in the community they can rely on (Ministry of Health and Population, 2012a; Amin et al., 2014a). Research has found that three times as many boys as girls are allowed to leave the house without permission (46% versus 15%) (Ministry of Health and Population, 2012a) and that boys are more likely to have someone from whom they can borrow money (71% versus 59%) or with whom they can stay if they have a problem (70% versus 58% – Amin et al., 2014a). Sexual violence and child marriage also increase girls' anxiety and depression (Deuba, et al., 2016; Kohrt et al., 2008; Plan Nepal et al., 2012).

That said, most older Nepali girls and young women (aged 15-24) are satisfied with their lives overall. Of those included in the 2014 MICS, over 80% reported being at

least somewhat satisfied and at least somewhat happy with their lives – and 57% believed that their lives had improved over the last year and were likely to improve again over the next year (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2015). Unfortunately, there is no comparable data available for adolescent boys or for older women. There is also no research that disaggregates adolescent girls' wellbeing by age and developmental stage, and little attempt to investigate the ways in which growing social media use – and cyber harassment – is having an impact on girls' psychosocial outcomes.

## Voice and agency

- **Nepal's patriarchal family structure means that sons are favoured over daughters from birth and that the latter have little opportunity to express their opinions in their natal families, their marital families or their communities.**
- **Married girls are often silenced not only by their husbands, but also by their mothers-in-law.**

The large body of evidence (104 sources) that addresses social norms and how they impact girls' voice and agency highlights that girls continue to be seen primarily as future wives and mothers. It finds that they are considered less valuable than boys from birth, because they will ultimately move to their husbands' homes, have lower earning potential, and have no role to play in funeral traditions, and consequently experience parental underinvestment and daily limits on their access to mobility, decision-making, and participation (Ghimire and Samuels, 2014a; Watson, 2014; Johnson, 2010; Subedi, 2011; Beutel and Axinn, 2002).

Gender norms shape children's access to decision-making from early childhood. Boys are encouraged to speak out and dominate while girls are expected to be docile and reserved (Watson, 2014; Lundgren et al., 2013). As they approach and move through adolescence, girls face ever more restrictions – as first their natal families and then their marital families force them to demonstrate that they are 'good girls' and 'ideal wives and daughters-in-law' by taking on the bulk of domestic labour and confining themselves to home (Ghimire and Samuels, 2014a). Adolescent girls, especially those who are younger, unmarried and less educated, report that they have limited opportunities to express themselves outside of school (ibid.), with both girls and boys agreeing

that girls are less likely to be able to refuse an arranged marriage than boys (Amin et al., 2014b). Unsurprisingly, adolescent girls aged 10-19 are more than four times more likely than their male peers to feel discriminated against at home (26% versus 6% for boys) and are also more likely to agree that men and women should be treated equally (92% of girls versus 80% of boys) (Amin et al., 2014b).

While some research suggests that older, married girls are more likely than their younger, unmarried peers to be allowed to express their opinions, other research suggests that husbands are more likely than wives to make the final decisions on issues such as education, health care, contraception, consumption and expenditure (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2011). Younger wives with older husbands are thought to be particularly disadvantaged in terms of decision-making – with girls also having to defer to their mothers-in-law given patrilocal residence (Aguilar and Cortez, 2015).

There are thousands of child clubs, run by both the government and NGOs, across Nepal. These clubs offer girls and boys the opportunity to identify and advance issues that are important for them (Johnson, 2010). However, not only is access highly limited in some areas, with only 7% of 10-19 year olds surveyed as part of ADAP's baseline members in a club (Amin et al., 2014b), but older adolescents have especially few opportunities for participation. The Nepal Adolescents and Youth Survey found that adolescents and young adults aged 15 to 24 are largely uninvolved in the political and civic activities that might provide girls with voice outside of the home. Just 2% of girls and 3% of boys were active, with boys more likely to participate in political activities and girls more likely to join groups for women and mothers (Ministry of Health and Population, 2012a). That said, where they do participate, adolescent girls seem to be able to access leadership positions. Thirty-eight per cent of boys who are general members of organisations or groups are in leadership positions, compared with 36% of girls (Ministry of Health and Population, 2012a).

While quite a bit is known about gender norms and how they shape girls' broader capabilities, little specific evidence speaks to their access to voice and agency. We do not know, for example, what sorts of decisions girls versus boys are allowed to make within their natal families – or how children's decision-making changes as they grow up and eventually form their own unions. We do

not know what opportunities for leadership girls have at school or in the community – or how those opportunities vary from those of boys or between different groups of girls.

## Economic empowerment

- **On average, adolescent girls work more hours each week than adolescent boys – but most of their work is unpaid household chores. Girls who work for pay are largely confined to the poorly paid and poorly protected informal labour market.**
- **Girls and young women have limited access to financial decision-making and are largely excluded from economic empowerment programmes. Those aimed at ‘youth’ target primarily boys and young men, and those aimed at women typically miss the youngest.**

There is a strong body of evidence (99 sources) about adolescent girls’ engagement with paid and unpaid labour, but comparatively little research about their broader economic empowerment. Overall, while girls work more hours each day than boys, they are less likely to be paid for their work and have limited access to assets and financial information and services.

In order to understand Nepali girls’ economic empowerment, it is first necessary to understand the country’s broader economic context. Despite recent progress, Nepal remains one of the poorest countries in the world, with 29% of the population considered multidimensionally poor<sup>3</sup> (OPHI, 2017). While Nepali law prohibits children under the age of 14 from working and states ‘that children aged 15-17 years shall not be engaged in work for more than six hours a day and more than 36 hours a week, either with or without additional remuneration’, economic necessity – especially in rural households with low levels of maternal education – drives high rates of child labour in Nepal (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2015). Based on data from the Nepal Labour Force Survey 2008, the International Labour

Organisation (2011) estimated that 1.6 million children aged 5-17 were engaged in child labour. Most children (74%) work in agricultural self-employment (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2011), although services (10%), domestic work (8%), and manufacturing (4%) are also common (Fafchamps and Wahba, 2006). Given age hierarchies in Nepal, children are generally not in charge of decisions regarding whether they should work or study (Edmonds and Shrestha, 2014).

It is also important to note that Nepal is an outlier in terms of women’s labour force participation in South Asia. While only 31% of women across the region are in the labour force (compared to 81% for men), 80% of Nepali women work, compared to 88% of Nepali men (ILO, 2014). The ILO notes that in part this difference is due to Nepal’s high levels of poverty – and in part it is because Nepali labour market figures include unpaid household labour such as the collection of firewood, which is excluded from the figures of other regional countries (such as India).

From childhood, girls work more than boys. Among younger adolescents (aged 12-14), 18% of girls work more than 14 hours a week (compared to 12% for boys) and 10% work more than 28 hours a week (compared to 3% for boys) (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2015). Among those aged 15-17, 64% of girls work fewer than 43 hours each week and 3% work more than that amount (versus 58.5% and 2% for boys) (ibid.).

While girls work more than boys, they are less likely to work for pay. The 2016 DHS reports that 40% of girls between the ages of 15 and 19 were employed at the time of the survey—compared to 47% of boys the same age. The DHS also found that girls and boys have different types of occupations. Among those aged 15-19, 80% of girls and only 44% of boys were employed in agriculture (Ministry of Health and Population, 2017). Boys, who have greater access to information and opportunities to build their human capital (Ghimire et al., 2013), are accordingly more likely to have skilled jobs (13% versus 6% for skilled manual labour, for example) (Ministry of Health and Population, 2017). The difference between the types of jobs open to boys and girls is also apparent in migration statistics. While adolescent girls are significantly more likely than adolescent boys to migrate (44% versus 21% for those aged 15-19), boys overwhelmingly migrate for work while girls migrate for marriage (Ministry of Health and Population, 2012b).

3 A 2010 national report on Child Poverty and Disparities found that Nepali children are even more likely to be poor than Nepali adults. Overall, two-thirds were severely deprived and 40% were absolutely poor (see: <http://unicef.org.np/uploads/files/70959608133463136-child-poverty-and-disparities-in-nepal.pdf>)

Married girls have different employment patterns. While they are more likely to work than their unmarried peers, they are less likely to work than married boys (49% vs. 94% for those aged 15-19) (Ministry of Health and Population, 2017). They are also even less likely to work for cash: almost 90% of working married girls are engaged in unpaid labour for their families (Bajracharya and Amin, 2010). The 2016 DHS found that of married girls between the ages of 15 and 19 who are paid in cash, an equal proportion report that they control their own earnings versus share decision-making with their husbands (38% vs. 36%). Only 6% of young women who are paid in cash report that their husbands decide how their earnings are spent.

The evidence on adolescent girls' savings suggests a conundrum. On the one hand, research has found that girls are more likely to use a bank account than boys (11.3% vs 8.3% for those aged 15-19) (Ministry of Health and Population, 2017) and have savings on average a full 50% higher (Amin et al., 2014b). It has also found that girls are more likely than boys to save for their own educations (70% versus 57%), which speaks to parental underinvestment – and girls' own commitment – to girls' education (Johnson et al., 2013). On the other hand, girls' access to formal financial services and savings groups appears limited. For example, among holders of YouthSave accounts, which target 12-18-year-olds, there are three male account holders for every two female account holders (Johnson et al., 2013) and only 2% of women aged 15-24 reported being a member of savings and credit groups or cooperatives (Ministry of Health and Population, 2012a). It is not known where girls get the money they are saving or what savings mechanisms they find especially useful.

Most of what we know about girls' access to employment speaks more to their need for child protection than to their economic empowerment. The limited information that we have about girls' cash incomes and financial decision-making comes from the DHS, which asked those questions only of married girls aged 15 to 19. We also know very little about different groups of girls' access to and needs for different types of financial services, including financial education. Finally, we were unable to locate any information on adolescent domestic workers, a glaring gap given how common they are in other South Asian countries.

## Programming for girls

For a small country, Nepal is home to a great many interventions aimed at improving girls' capabilities. However, most of these interventions, which are summarised by their impacts on girls' capabilities in Box 2, have never been evaluated. Our evidence review of programmes found only 56 impact studies and evaluations – of which the vast majority were available only in the grey literature. Only 11 of those studies could be considered rigorous. Critically, nearly all evaluations were completed soon after programme end and did not trace longer-term impacts or ascertain how effects played out in early adulthood. Most also failed to disaggregate programme impacts by girls' ages.

Our Evidence Mapping concluded in that in some ways the strengths and weaknesses of interventions aimed at Nepali girls are similar to those seen in other countries. For example, programming is increasingly multifaceted and aimed at improving multiple capability domains at once by working with a wide range of actors using a variety of specific tactics. Because of this broad approach, it is difficult to ascertain what forms of programming are most efficacious at creating what forms of change for what groups of girls. On the other hand, our Evidence Mapping also found that the programming space in Nepal has a number of comparatively unique features – which have the potential to both speed and slow change. Specifically, while child clubs are nearly ubiquitous and offer an 'easy in' to adolescents, their gender lens has historically been weak and they are too rarely coupled with programming for adults.

Nepal's child and youth clubs offer a comparatively unique entry point for reaching girls. These clubs began forming in the early 1990s in order to facilitate young people's participation in local governance (Rajbhandary et al., 2001). Now numbering over 20,000, and serving a population that is roughly half girls (GoN, 2015; Bista and O'Kane, 2015), these clubs not only allow young people to organise themselves in order to interface with local leaders about issues that concern them, but have been found by international agencies and NGOs to serve as an excellent venue for reaching young people at scale (Adhikary et al., 2009; GoN and UNICEF, n.d.). Indeed, it appears that most NGO programming aimed at girls and boys – even mass media approaches (see Box 3) – use clubs to reach children. Sometimes they work with already existing community

## Box 2: What works to enhance girls' capabilities?

### Education and learning

Since the 1970s, the government, UN agencies, the donor community, and local and international NGOs have implemented several scholarship and incentive programmes as a key strategy to promote the education of girls (ERDCN, 2011; Acharya and Luitel, 2006). More recently, the School Sector Reform Programme succeeded in promoting gender equality by hiring more female teachers, providing separate toilets for girls and boys, making schools safer, and introducing less gender-biased textbooks (DPMG, 2015; Terry and Thapa, 2012). The latest education programming has moved beyond relatively mechanistic approaches and is providing girls with school-based clubs and mentoring, working with parents to change the gender norms that lead them to deprioritise girls' education, and engaging in community mobilisation. Evidence suggests that this multi-pronged approach is more likely to deliver lasting change than programmes that work only to empower girls without also working to open space in their environments (Alejos, 2015; Cadena et al., 2015). On the other hand, there is very little evidence that speaks to how to support older girls' to return to school – or how to reach the most marginalised, such as girls who are married or extremely poor.

### Bodily autonomy, integrity, and freedom from violence

Our review, like that of the International Center for Research on Women, found that although there are many child protection and life skills interventions for girls and boys in Nepal, 'very few programmes explicitly address prevention of child marriage and elimination of harmful practices as measurable outcomes' (ICRW, 2014: 6). Indeed, most interventions appear to have assumed that simply teaching girls about their rights and keeping them in school would ultimately eliminate child marriage and somehow transform gender relations. The handful of interventions which have laid out explicit goals have broadly found – like programmes aimed at improving girls' education – that it is best to target girls, parents and communities simultaneously. In particular, the inclusion of boys appears to be important, not only because they are part of the solution, but also because programmes focusing exclusively on girls and neglecting boys may create negative side effects. Because evidence is so thin, we know almost nothing about what works to protect the bodily integrity of particular age groups or categories of girls, such as those in rural areas, married girls, girls with disabilities or those belonging to disadvantaged groups such as Dalits or Janajatis.

### Sexual and reproductive health, health and nutrition

There are a large number of interventions aiming to improve the sexual and reproductive health of adolescent girls in Nepal. The majority of these programmes provide training sessions on SRH and support adolescents to form discussion groups or clubs. In particular, many of these programmes use a participatory or peer education approach. A handful of programmes are entirely school-based, while a number of programmes focus specifically on improving community health services to become more adolescent-friendly. Most of these interventions have operated on quite a large scale and have had a reasonable amount of success. However, as existing evaluations do not assess which programme components are the most effective, and for which groups, we do not know how to tailor future programmes to meet the needs of different populations of adolescent girls. We also know very little about how to change behaviours – as opposed to merely knowledge and attitudes.

### Psychosocial wellbeing

Evidence on interventions aiming to improve adolescent girls' psychosocial wellbeing is very limited and focuses on adolescents affected by the conflict, survivors of violence and abuse, and those who were traumatised by the 2015 earthquake. While it appears that family support, friendship, and economic independence promote girls' wellbeing, a complete lack of robust evaluation data means that we know almost nothing about what works to promote emotional health in the broader population of Nepali adolescent girls.

### Voice and agency

There is a considerable and growing body of literature on interventions seeking to transform discriminatory gender norms, increase adolescent girls' voice and promote their agency. Moreover, these interventions combine various objectives from empowering girls and women to improve their lives to increasing child participation in local governance. Evidence indicates that participation with other girls or boys in clubs which provide safe spaces, awareness raising, skills training and peer support enables girls to develop their leadership and communication skills, increase their self-confidence, voice their concerns and engage in decision-making. That said, there is also evidence that child clubs are all too often siloed from other local organisations, meaning that girls' voices are not heard by the adults who can help them translate voice into action (Adhikary et al., 2009).

## Box 2 (continued): What works to enhance girls' capabilities?

### Economic empowerment

There is a considerable body of literature on interventions targeting adolescent girls and aiming to improve their economic wellbeing by building their skills, increasing their employability, supporting their access to credit and helping them start a business. Most, however, are limited in scale. Existing evidence indicates that vocational training schemes appear to be successful when they provide training relevant to the particular local context, include adequate on-the-job training and are linked to employment opportunities for trainees. That said, the vast majority of programmes aimed at economic empowerment are either targeted at women, and lack any sort of age disaggregated focus, or at youth up to age 30, and lack lenses for both age and gender. Indeed, several evaluations explicitly noted that youth training projects were not gender sensitive and did not pay attention to the particular challenges and needs of girls and young women, let alone the discriminatory gender norms that limit their economic participation.

That said, because most clubs are for children and adolescents – and not girls specifically – to date they appear to have under-delivered on gender transformative change. They do not offer girls the girl-only safe spaces that have been found in other countries to be critical in adolescence and until recently they have rarely addressed gender inequality head-on. Given the role that child clubs play in Nepal, and the fact that they can and do deliver results for girls, strengthening their ability to help girls and boys talk openly about gender roles and equality will be important going forward if they are to be maximally leveraged.

Programming delivered through child clubs also appears to be overly siloed from the adult world. While children need friendly spaces in which to encounter life-skills programming, speak about things taboo at home, and practise decision-making that Nepal's age hierarchical culture often denies them, shaping the younger generation needs to be better paired with efforts to help adults recognise and support those changes. To date that appears quite rare in Nepal, where men and women also have their own separate committees and programming, and even women's groups only rarely support adolescent girls. Save the Children's Choices, Promises and Voices approach was one of the first programmes that evolved to address this siloing (see Box 4).

## Box 3: Child clubs for change

Nepali child and youth clubs are being used to amplify the impacts of media-based 'edutainment' programmes, including the weekly radio show *Chatting with My Best Friend* (*Saathi Sanga Manka Kura*). The show, which was launched by UNICEF in 2001 and has been heard by more than 90% of Nepali adolescent girls and boys, covers a wide array of topics: puberty, sexual and reproductive health, peer pressure and resistance, drug use and STDs, and education and work opportunities. An impact study has found that it is successfully empowering young people to make informed decisions about the issues that matter in their daily lives (Ghimire et al., 2015). To ensure that it stays relevant, the programme encourages young people to write in with their opinions and concerns and works with Village Development Committees to partner with listeners to build 'youth hubs' to raise local awareness about the issues that young people face.

#### Box 4: Adapting and evolving to meet real-world need

Save the Children's *Choices, Promises and Voices* approach was adapted to meet the Nepali context and has evolved to address concerns about programme isolation. When it was first proposed, the Choices curriculum was meant to be aimed at helping boys become more gender sensitive. However, as noted above, Nepal's child clubs are for both girls and boys. Save the Children accordingly adjusted its curriculum so that it could use existing clubs to deliver programming. It piloted the programme in 2010 with young adolescents from the Terai region. Evaluation, which took place soon after the three-month programme ended, concluded that it was successful at raising children's awareness about gender inequality, helping girls to develop confidence and voice and boys to support their sisters by helping them with chores and advocating for their rights, but needed to include work with parents and communities in order to create more sustainable change. This led Save the Children to create the Promises programme for young adolescents' parents and the Voices programme to shift community norms using parents' testimonials. While neither module has been rigorously evaluated, a process evaluation of the former found that it changed the way parents treated their daughters because it used liked role models and encouraged parents to see what gender inequality was costing their daughters.

## Conclusions

Our Evidence Mappings uncovered a wealth of information on Nepali girls, most of it only visible in the 'grey literature'. However, while much is known, even more remains unexplored. Key in terms of understanding girls' capability outcomes is the disaggregation which is central to GAGE's conceptual framework. Specifically, most of what we know about Nepali adolescent girls speaks only to the experiences of the oldest – and often only to the experiences of those who are married. This is a glaring problem given the speed with which adolescent lives are changing, particularly in regard to access to education and vulnerability to child marriage, and emerging concerns that shifts in adolescent practices are outpacing not only available services but data collection. In addition, some of GAGE's capability areas have attracted little research. For example, we know little about Nepali girls' psychosocial needs and far less about their experiences with economic empowerment than with child labour. Finally, while it seems clear that programming for girls must be shaped around child clubs – given not only their scope but also their social acceptability – it is unclear how to mould clubs to better address the unique gendered needs that girls have.

Fortunately, the Evidence Mappings on which this short synthesis was based represent only one of GAGE's four work-streams. Having now mapped what is known – and not known – about the capabilities of Nepali adolescent girls, and how existing interventions are supporting the expansion of those capabilities, GAGE will be moving forward with its mixed-methods longitudinal research aimed at extending evidence and filling gaps. Combining quantitative and qualitative work with policy and legal analysis, GAGE will hone in on what works to support Nepali girls to work towards the futures they choose.

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## **About GAGE**

Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) is a nine-year longitudinal research programme generating evidence on what works to transform the lives of adolescent girls in the Global South. Visit [www.gage.odi.org.uk](http://www.gage.odi.org.uk) for more information.

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