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Intergenerational capabilities development in mothers and adolescent daughters in Nepal

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Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agenda to 'leave no one behind' promotes gender equality as a key global development aim. The Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) research programme has identified six key capability development areas: education and learning; bodily integrity and freedom from violence; health, nutrition, and sexual and reproductive health (SRH); psychosocial wellbeing; voice and agency; and economic empowerment. Enhancing adolescent girls' capabilities across these six domains could bring benefits for girls, their families and communities now and in the future (Sen, 2004).

Intergenerational capability development refers to the changes in capabilities that are experienced across and between different generations of women and girls. In Nepal, the lives of younger women compared with older women have changed dramatically in recent years. For example, compared to women aged 35–39 years, women aged 20–24 years are less likely to have been married before age 18 (40% versus 57%), to have had children by age 18 (16% versus 25%), or to have no schooling (6% versus 54%). However, the younger cohort are only slightly more likely to hold a professional job (7% versus 5%) (Ministry of Health, 2017). This shows that the barriers facing women are at the level of society rather than the individual; overcoming those barriers will therefore require broader structural transformation.

Evidence from research in Nepal corroborates other literature, which indicates that maternal capabilities relate to daughters' capabilities in myriad ways (Sekhri and Debnath, 2014; Alderman and Headey, 2017). In the United States, Currie and Moretti (2003) suggest that human capital is transmitted from mothers to children; in Bangladesh, Akter et al. (2015)

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show that similar patterns have emerged in data on child mortality. In Nepal, Choe et al. (2005) suggest that parental wishes largely determine when children marry, but do not specifically explore the full range of parental capabilities, focusing on their education level and work rather than their aspirations, wellbeing or agency. That work also only offered a snapshot, rather than drawing a comparison between the different opportunities available to girls now compared to just a few years ago.

Understanding intergenerational change enables us to identify opportunities for policy and programming to expand the capabilities of women and girls. This policy brief compares mothers' and daughters' capabilities in Nepal to assess where changes have been strongest and weakest – and, importantly, the influence of maternal capabilities on daughters' capabilities in several key domains. We conclude with recommendations about the implications of this research for policy and programming for adolescent girls.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of mothers and daughters in the study sample, Tanahun and Nuwakot districts, Nepal

	Mothers (n = 1,426) %	Girls (n = 1,494) %
Demographic characteristics		
Caste/ethnicity (expanded)		
Upper caste groups	29.6	
Disadvantaged indigenous groups	28.6	
Relatively advantaged indigenous groups	14.5	
Dalit	26.1	
Disadvantaged Terai and religious minority groups	1.2	
Educational outcomes		
Highest level of schooling completed		
No formal education (mothers)/Not currently in school (girls)	39.6	0.3
Primary school or less	25.0	1.7
Secondary school or less	34.4	98.1
More than secondary school	1.1	0.0
Level of schooling desired for girl(s)		
Less than high school	3.7	3.2
Completion of high school	25.8	23.9
Bachelor's degree or higher	70.5	72.9
Economic empowerment		
Occupation of mothers		
Agriculture	53.0	
Daily wage/labor	8.6	
Professional	14.8	
Homemaker or none	23.0	
Other	0.6	
Desired occupation of girls		
Agriculture	0.4	2.0
Daily wage/labor	0.6	0.8
Professional	98.6	95.2
Homemaker or none	0.4	0.6
Other	0.0	0.5
Missing	0.0	1.0

Methods

This analysis draws on data collected for the GAGE study Supporting Girls' Education: Evaluation of Room to Read in Nepal. The participants included 1,494 adolescent girls enrolled in schools in Nuwakot and Tanahun districts, along with 1,426 adult caretakers who indicated that they were biological mothers or stepmothers to at least one adolescent girl in the sample. The research covered a subset of the capability domains of interest to GAGE, exploring: voice, agency and mobility; livelihoods, financial literacy, economic empowerment; and gender attitudes and norms. We then assessed whether maternal capabilities in a particular domain were associated with daughters' capabilities in that same domain.

Findings

Mothers' capabilities were almost universally associated with daughters' capabilities. Mothers had very high aspirations for their daughters' education and occupation, and daughters' aspirations mirrored those of their mothers. Capabilities in voice, agency and mobility were very similar between mothers and daughters. Occupation was the only maternal capability that was not associated with daughters' corresponding capability. Regardless of their mother's economic empowerment or lack thereof, daughters expressed ambitious goals and desired to work at a senior level.



Education and learning

The data shows that girls' educational attainment in Nepal has increased compared to the last generation (Table 1). Mothers' schooling level was significantly associated with daughters' desired level of education (Table 3). As mothers' schooling level increased, so too did the level of education their daughters aspired to.



Voice, agency and mobility

Mothers had greater capacity for freedom of movement than girls, but capacity for frequency of movement was similar for mothers and girls. Girls were slightly more comfortable than mothers in expressing their opinions among family members. Mothers and girls had similar capacity for expressing opinions in the community, input in decision-making, leadership competence, and social action (Table 2). Mothers' capabilities in the voice, agency and mobility domain were significantly associated with daughters' capabilities in this domain (Table 3).



Economic empowerment

Mothers overwhelmingly wanted daughters to work in professional occupations (98.6%), and girls also desired professional occupations for themselves (95.0%) (Table 1). Whether their mother worked in a professional occupation was not significantly associated with daughters' desire to do so (Table 3).

Table 2: Capabilities of mothers and daughters in the study sample, Tanahun and Nuwakot districts

	Mothers (n = 1,426)				Girls (n = 1,692)				p
	Mean	SE	Min	Max	Mean	SE	Min	Max	
Voice and agency (higher score indicates higher VAM)									
Mobility and access to spaces									
Freedom of movement, scale 0-21	17.6	0.3	7	21	11.6	0.2	5	21	<0.01
Frequency of movement, scale 0-28	19.8	0.2	8	28	20.3	0.2	8	28	<0.01
Meaningful participation and decision-making in family, community and school life									
Comfort expressing opinions among family, scale 0-16	10.2	0.1	0	16	12.9	0.2	0	16	<0.01
Comfort expressing opinions in the community, scale 0-24	14.5	0.4	0	24	14.8	0.3	1	24	0.11
Input on decision-making, scale 0-24	19.4	0.4	7	24	18.8	0.4	6	24	<0.01
Leadership competence, scale 0-28	17.9	0.3	0	27	18.9	0.3	0	27	<0.01
Social action, scale 0-24	18.4	0.1	0	24	18.1	0.3	0	24	<0.05
Belief in gender norms (higher score indicates higher belief in gender equity)									
Norms about femininity, scale 0-24	14.4	0.4	2	24	16.0	0.3	0	24	<0.01
Norms about masculinity, scale 0-21	13.9	0.3	0	21	14.5	0.2	0	21	<0.01
Norms about gender roles, scale 0-27	21.3	0.2	9	24	21.3	0.2	8	24	0.90

Table 3: Determinants of girls' capabilities

		Daughters' capabilities											
		Educational and economic outcomes		Voice, agency and mobility						Belief in gender norms			
		Desired education	Desired occupation	Freedom of movement	Frequency of movement	Comfort expressing opinions (family)	Comfort expressing opinions (community)	Input on decision-making	Leadership competence	Social action	Norms about femininity	Norms about masculinity	Norms about gender roles
Maternal responsibilities	Educational and economic outcomes												
	Schooling level	0.08*	0.03	-0.09**	0	-0.01	0.01	0	0	-0.02	-0.07	0.10**	-0.04
	Occupation	0.22	0.72	0.62**	-0.82**	-0.68**	0.07	-0.5	0.05	-1.02***	0	-0.28	-0.39
	Voice, agency and mobility												
	Freedom of movement	0	0.15	0.21***	-0.07*	-0.08**	-0.05	-0.16***	-0.11*	-0.09**	0.02	-0.01	0
	Frequency of movement	-0.04	-0.25	-0.01	0.30***	0.07**	0.10*	0.08**	0.12*	0.19***	0	-0.01	0.04
	Comfort expressing opinions in family	0.01	0.2	0.02	0.15***	0.19***	0.09	0.05	0.08	0.03	-0.02	-0.01	0.05
	Comfort expressing opinions in community	0.01	-0.04	0.01	0.03	0.08***	0.32***	0.02	0.02	0.01	-0.01	0.03	0
	Input in decisions	0.05	-0.2	-0.02	0	-0.03	0.16***	0.35***	0.21***	0.25***	-0.07	-0.01	0.04
	Leadership competence	0.06*	0.12	0.05*	0.02	-0.02	0	0.04	0.14***	0.05	0.01	-0.01	-0.01
	Social action	-0.05	-0.07	-0.02	0.01	-0.01	0.03	0.10**	0.20***	0.27***	-0.05	-0.03	0.05*
	Belief in gender norms												
	Femininity	0	0.22	-0.05*	0.03	-0.01	0.09**	-0.06*	-0.07	-0.03	0.29***	0.15***	0.05*
	Masculinity	0.01	-0.08	0.01	-0.04	-0.03	-0.01	-0.02	0.01	-0.04	0.17***	0.29***	0.06*
Gender roles	0.08	0.11	-0.03	0.04	0.08**	-0.07	0.06	-0.02	0.03	0.22***	0.22***	0.40***	

Girls' capabilities include schooling attainment; economic empowerment; and voice, agency and mobility; all were adjusted for household socio-economic status, caste and all other maternal capabilities
Significance: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Gender norms

Girls had slightly more equitable beliefs about femininity than their mothers. Mothers and daughters had similarly moderate levels of equitable beliefs about masculinity, and beliefs about gender equitable roles were moderate among both groups. Mothers' beliefs about femininity, masculinity and gender roles were all significantly associated with corresponding beliefs among their daughters.

Policy recommendations

Engaging mothers to support their daughters

These findings highlight the important role that mothers play in girls' lives. Tapping into maternal support by engaging mothers may be an effective way to support adolescent girls to choose pathways that challenge gender norms, such as to continue with secondary schooling or delay marriage. Our study lacked data on the role that fathers play in girls' lives; future research should examine the influence of fathers and consider father-engaged programming to support daughters, as well.

Engaging mothers and daughters in norm change

The similarity between mothers' and daughters' beliefs about gender norms and roles highlights a major challenge for interventions that address these by working with young people only; our research shows the importance of intergenerational transmission of beliefs and how this can undermine key messages aimed at shifting gender norms.

Tapping into mothers' missed opportunities

Mothers' lack of capability in a particular domain can have a positive influence on daughters' capability development, as mothers may have a strong desire to support daughters in areas where they themselves lacked opportunity. These may be useful entry points for conversations about supporting daughters to access opportunities denied to previous generations of women.

Avoiding outdated norms to promote daughters' continued schooling

Mothers' desire for their daughters to go into professional careers may be more to do with respectability than challenging outdated norms; this desire should not be assumed to align with more liberal opinions about gender roles. Interventions with mothers and daughters should not therefore rely on this as a rationale for promoting schooling. Increasing investment in girls' capabilities across these domains is likely to have far-reaching positive impacts on the lives of Nepali girls now and in future generations.

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