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DOI:
[10.1080/03057925.2021.1987191](https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2021.1987191)

Publication date:
2023

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Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in Discovery Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Dahal, T., Topping, K. J., & Levy, S. (2023). Patriarchy, Gender Norms and Female Student Dropout from High Schools in Nepal. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 53(6), 1005-1023.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2021.1987191>

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Patriarchy, gender norms and female student dropout from high schools in Nepal

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ABSTRACT

This study captured multiple perspectives on female student dropout from high schools in Nepal. We used random, purposive and snowballing sampling methods to select respondents from seven categories: parents, dropped-out students, students in school, head teachers, teachers and district education office staff. The 96 participants were geographically diverse; from six districts in three ecological regions: the mountains, the hills and the Terai. In-depth interviews were conducted. Findings revealed an array of socio-cultural issues pertinent to gender imbalance, a patriarchal value system and educational issues that disfavoured female students. It was concluded that there was a need for substantial restructuring of the education system in Nepal, including effective economic reform, stakeholder awareness programmes, and sound planning for eliminating gender inequalities functioning within the patriarchal value system at all levels of socio-economic disadvantage.


KEYWORDS

Drop out; Nepal; high school; females; gender

1. Introduction

Nepal has a relatively brief educational history. Expansion of education began only in the latter half of the twentieth century (1951), with the establishment of the Ministry of Education and the adoption of a constitution that made education a right for every Nepalese citizen (Stash and Hannum 2001). Education made rapid strides thereafter. Nepal's financial reliance on external agencies such as the World Bank led to an influence on education, particularly in the decades after 1980 (Regmi 2021). However, Regmi (2021) emphasises that the influence of the international development partners raises questions about the education strategies recommended by such donors in relation to national and local contextual realities.

Nepal has a problem of school dropout, particularly among females. This cannot be linked to a single cause or geographical region. It is prevalent across the country and not limited to one group of students. This paper reports on a study that explored factors affecting female students' early departure from high school in Nepal. Girls' school dropout has serious implications for their futures and for the country's goal of achieving gender parity in educational outcomes with consequences for employment opportunities.

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A large number of Nepalis are living in poverty, with 28.6% experiencing multi-dimensional poverty (Government of Nepal 2018). Further, the distribution of development is unequal across the country. Two types of schools exist: public schools (government-funded and non-profit, free) and private schools (non-government, profit-oriented and English medium). The public-private educational dichotomy (Devkota and Bagale 2015) reflects class differences in educational access and retention. Generally, wealthy people choose to educate their children in private schools, and lower-class people send their children to public schools. Decreasing government funding of public education has led to deteriorating quality and an increase in the number of private schools. Particularly, middle-class parents suffer heavy economic pressure to send their children to private schools, since they neither trust public education nor can afford private education (Sharma, Dangal, and Pande, 2015).

Female literacy and female education are a matter of concern for educational practitioners and policymakers. According to the Central Bureau of Statistics ([2016] 2017), the female literacy rate is 60.5 percent compared to the male literacy rate of 76.2 percent. Various studies reveal that the roots of this discrepancy lie in female children's school enrolment, the unequal distribution of development within the kingdom, and social class and caste stratification (Rothchild 2005; LeVine 2006; Stash and Hannum 2001; Mohanraj 2010). Gender and (in many parts of the country) caste affect literacy inequality (Maddox and Esposito 2013) and consequently inequality in schooling outcomes.

Studies in Nepal show that gender inequality exists in several spheres. The root of inequality lies in patriarchal socio-cultural and educational structures which have the effect of maintaining male domination, whether this is intended or not. Maharjan (2013) states that Nepal ranks second highest on the world index of preference for sons. The completion rate of the five-year primary school cycle for girls is 51.7 percent (Ministry of Education Nepal 2013). Likewise, UNICEF's Nepal Country Study (2016) reveals that girls are much more likely than boys to never enter school, and 5.7 percent of girls (compared to 4.3 percent of boys) are especially likely to be out of school at lower secondary school age. The Human Development Report (Government of Nepal 2020, 39) comments on a 'critical shortfall in women's empowerment and economic standing'. Based on a 2017–2018 survey, 48.3 percent of males of working age were in employment, whereas only 22.9 percent of females were in employment. Among all working-age women, 52.4 percent were contributing family workers compared to 27.7 percent of men (*Ibid* p 39).

Agriculture is the main occupation of the majority of people and land is the major means of production. Females carry out most household responsibilities, yet they are deprived of access to resources (natural, human or social) because of the hierarchical structure and power dynamics within a Nepali family. Women are generally denied land rights as sons inherit their parents' property (Thapa 2009). The reason for such denial is the marriage system because daughters are often required to move in with their husband's family after marriage.

Therefore, providing Nepali girls with education is crucial as a defence against such social, educational, and economic tendencies. Education could enable them to understand family and socio-political dynamics and take action to seize opportunities within institutions where otherwise they are often pushed to the margins. Some at least would become empowered through their learning skills, access to employment, and their

economic standing, and become leaders in their communities and beyond (Rana 2012). Mahat (2003) argues that such empowerment aims to achieve equality through transforming the structures, systems, and institutions that have maintained inequality.

For all these reasons it is important to explore issues related to female students' school education, and in particular female dropout from high schools. However, questions related to school systems cannot be fully examined without taking into account the social context within which schools function. Therefore, this paper will also report on findings pertinent to socio-cultural aspects such as patriarchy and gender norms. The following research questions drove this study:

- (1) What impact does the school system, teaching and assessment have on high school girl students' likelihood of dropout?
- (2) Is there any link between the examination system, socio-cultural context and girl students' dropout?
- (3) What socio-cultural factors cause girl students to abandon their schooling early?

2. Theoretical background: exclusion

This study utilises the theoretical lens of 'exclusion' to understand how patriarchal values embedded within homes and school systems cause estrangement and alienation of females (Bhatty et al. 2014) and link to drop out. Previous studies conducted in Nepal (Rothchild 2005; LeVine 2006) indicate that social perceptions and practice tend to exclude females from educational participation and formal employment. Therefore, the lens of exclusion is highly relevant.

In Nepal attitudes to gender across generations are deeply embedded in hegemonic features of social life (Potuchek 1997). Family is the first place where children are exposed to and experience their gender status. This gender division is reproduced through the subsequent division of labour at home and responsibility for household resources. Decision-making at the domestic and national level is determined by patriarchal structures (Gram et al. 2018). According to the Nepal Development Research Institute (Nepal Development Research Institute 2017), Nepal ranks 115th out of 188 countries on the UNDP Gender Inequality Index 2016, and sixth among eight South Asian countries.

Thus, women's oppression is inherent in the structure of the society and determines power relations and a gendered division of labour. Patriarchy perpetuates power relations that place male members in privileged positions. Omwami (2011) states that poverty and patriarchy tend to work to limit educational opportunities for women and girls.

The exclusion lens incorporates exclusion at two levels: socio-cultural and economic-political. The socio-cultural aspect influences the status of females at home and in the society, through cultural practices of marriage and allocation of household resources, with onward effects on females' schooling. Similarly, it also affects how the caste system and ethnicity interact with girls' participation in education and what elements cause early disengagement from school. The economic-political exclusion lens is relevant to the economic and political provision of the government for education and its effect on females' schooling. Robinson-Pant (2004) argued that government policymakers in Nepal did not recognise the caste and class bias in the system of provision for girls' education. It thus denied reality, eventually failing to include girls from all castes and economic backgrounds.

Like Robinson-Pant (2004), Dahal, Topping, and Levy (2019) found that the education policymakers failed to create school structures that could provide a safe space for both boys and girls, and scholarship provisions for girls did not address the diversity in terms of caste and economic backgrounds. Such structures did not support the participation of all pupils who faced learning and/or behaviour challenges of any kind, in terms of socio-economic circumstances, ethnic origin, religion and gender (Boyle and Topping 2012). The economic-political lens thus aims to discover if spending on schools influences gender exclusion, while also being linked to household economies and decision-making on household spending.

3. Review of literature

A review of literature was carried out and eventually, 23 studies out of 3308 were selected. The specific criteria for inclusion were:

- School dropouts in Nepal Primary Schools or Secondary Schools, with a focus on girls' schooling and/or gender gaps. Previous studies of girls' schooling in Nepal would help identify gaps in the existing literature.
- A focus on the school system, curriculum and educational policy in relation to female dropout or dropout in general, since it would be crucial to examine the extent to which the school system had been a cause of student dropout.
- School dropouts in India or any other South Asian country with similar socio-cultural conditions with a focus on girls' school attendance and dropout, since studies in India and other parts of South Asia, would be useful because of the similarity in economic and cultural backgrounds.
- Factors that caused girls' dropout in Nepal and other related countries, since there appeared to be few studies only in Nepal.
- Data or evidence must be included, rather than mere description or opinion.

The following sections examine the selected studies in detail.

3.1 Gendered institutions, maternal work and education, caste and ethnicity in Nepal

The majority of studies that investigated the effect of caste and gender on school attainment found that caste is a strong predictor of educational attainment. Neupane (2017) found an adverse impact of gender and caste/ethnic hierarchy on the final exam scores of female students. She argued that the 'double disadvantage of gender and culture is one of the major factors behind girls' poor educational attainment, especially in regions of high ethnic diversity' (p. 69). However, Stash and Hannum (2001) contradicted other studies, stating that belonging to a higher caste did not guarantee a better chance of school completion.

Rothchild (2005) explored how the process of gendering outside school influenced girls' participation in school, the extent of that participation and what roles the schools as gendered institutions played. She found gender as a persistent determinant of girls' schooling gain. According to this study, households were gendered in three ways: i) patrilineal

marriage tradition (girls leave their parents' home after marriage), ii) non-agricultural employment is perceived as more appropriate for males than for females, iii) the gender-based division of agricultural work requires more routine work from females than males.

Beutel and Axinn (2002) had a larger sample and added two important variables interacting with gender – social change and the presence of non-family services and organisations such as cinema, supermarket and so on. An important conclusion was that the influence of non-family services and organisation had a significant gender effect on school entry, as they raised the possibility of girls' entry into the school considerably, but the effect was not that significant in girls' school exit.

Stash and Hannum (2001), like Rothchild (2005) and Beutel and Axinn (2002), explored the effect of gender on school entrance and attainment, introducing variables such as caste and ethnicity. This study found that residence in urban areas and household heads with higher education did not guarantee gender equity in educational decision-making. More conservative attitudes towards women in high-caste households were reflected in fewer chances for girls entering the educational process.

LeVine (2006) focused on gender, women's literacy and girl students' dropout, correlating mothers' literacy behaviour with daughters' schooling outcome. Besides the unequal distribution of domestic labour, LeVine found that lack of economic benefit to parents, the onset of menstruation and the arrival of marriage proposals also led to girls leaving school.

While exploring policy, Robinson-Pant (2004) found that education policy in Nepal treated women as a suppressed and victimised group of the population, but not as actors in the development process. Policy-makers attempted to de-politicise the issue of gender by ignoring caste and class bias within the system of special provision for girls' education. This led to finding short-term technical solutions, rather than addressing long-standing gender issues related to girls' schooling and women's literacy.

Dancer and Rammohan (2007) focused on the intergenerational link in children's schooling, looking at the causal impact of mothers' education on children's school attainment. The study concluded that educated mothers had a clear effect on daughters' continuity in school. Bajracharya (2010) explored the association of women's nature of work with sons' and daughters' schooling outcome, using data from the Nepal Living Standards Survey (NLSS), and concluded that mothers' nature of work had a significant effect on daughters' education – if the mother had a non-agricultural occupation, this enhanced the daughters' educational outcome. Shrestha and Shrestha (2020) focused on maternal educational characteristics and their effect on girls' education. The study found that one additional year of a mother's schooling increased her daughter's probability of completing the eighth grade by 3–5 percentage points and schooling level by 0.2 years.

It is also worth taking note of two studies conducted in Botswana. Fuller, Singer, and Keilei (1995) and Makwinja-Morara (2009) focused on different social complexities that obstructed girls' educational goals. In each of the locations in Botswana, traditional social context, poor economic status and gender bias caused problems as hierarchies in kinship and family structures continued to serve men's interests.

3.2 Menstruation, location-specific gender norms, and girls' schooling

Menstruation as a cause for girls leaving school has been an issue of debate. Most studies on this topic are based in the traditional societies of South Asian and Sub-Saharan countries. They have emphasised that the onset of menstruation poses a physiological and symptomatic challenge to girls, which could limit their activities and interaction with teachers and fellow students (Dalton 1991). Such studies 'illustrate how emotional geographies of puberty and menstruation help to reproduce gender inequalities in mobility and access to social capital resources, especially education' (Jewitt and Ryley 2014, 137).

However, in Nepal Oster and Thornton (2009) contradicted this with findings about the effect of menstruation on girls' schooling, rejecting earlier claims that girls missed their schools significantly during their period. In a longitudinal study, they found that the impact of menstruation was not that significant and the use of modern sanitary products raised attendance by only 0.02 percent.

Adhikari (2013) conducted an empirical study in the Nawalparasi district of Nepal, focusing on the effect of traditional gender norms on adolescent girls' attendance. Regarding the effect of menstruation, this study found that menstruation was a huge barrier to girls' school attendance because of teachers' and fellow students' perceptions towards it. Like Adhikari (2013), McMahan et al. (2011) found a significant impact of menstruation on girl students' school attendance and learning outcomes in Kenya. Initially, girls tried to face menstruation while in school; later they gave up and missed school routinely in anticipation of menstruation for fear they might be stigmatised by peers.

Besides menstruation, studies carried out in Nepal and different parts of the world have found location-specific gender issues. Gupta (2019) found that the dowry system and early marriage barred girls from continuing their school education in the rural *Madhesh* (southern plains) of Nepal. In Rwanda Gahima (2012) and in Israel Anderson-Fye (2010) found that parents attempted to retain traditional gender relations.

3.3 Family, cultural and economic factors

Household decisions regarding allocating household resources regarding children's education are important. They embody the possibility of gender-based differentiation in household education spending and school attendance. Khanal (2018) found that expenditure decisions were influenced by gender preference. Parents spent more on boys than girls in both rural and urban areas, because they thought in terms of the returns they would receive in their old age. Likewise, Adhikari (2013) found that factors related to marriage and household decisions in Nepal determined female students' school outcome. Sekine, Hodgkin, and Gammage (2017) explored the effect of early marriage on girls' dropout in Nepal.

Three other studies: two based in India (Jain 2006; Mohanraj 2010) and one in Bangladesh (Sahidul 2013) had important findings about family, cultural and economic factors. Sahidul (2013) found that mothers did not often make decisions, but whenever they did, it helped the girls stay longer. Jain (2006) found that socio-psychological factors such as parents' concern for daughters' safety, educational factors such as the education

level of family members, and economic factors such as family earning determined girls' school outcome. Likewise, for Mohanraj (2010) insufficient government incentives and parental perceptions of female education determined girls' school outcome.

3.4 Conclusion

The studies reviewed in this section have analysed the educational gender gap from various perspectives. They stimulate a debate around patriarchy, power relations and discriminatory labour division as causes of educational exclusion through gender inequality, with a significant impact on schooling outcome for girls. The studies conducted in Nepal such as Rothchild (2005), Adhikari (2013), Khanal (2018), Gupta (2019) and LeVine (2006) revealed that the patriarchal value system embedded in Nepali socio-cultural and educational structures has in many cases caused girls' early school abandonment. The argument that education provided a tool for liberty for females was introduced by Spender (1982) and Mahony (2011). Several studies such as Rothchild (2005), LeVine (2006), Jain (2006), Mohanraj (2010), Dancer and Rammohan (2007) and Sahidul (2013) confirmed that cultural and socio-economic forces interact with gender, class differentiation and patriarchal family values to affect female students' education. These studies also found that change is taking place, but it is slow.

4. Method

4.1 Sampling

The consolidated report published by the Government of Nepal (2011) was used to select locations for data collection. Six districts with the highest and the lowest female proportions of school dropouts in each geographical region – mountain, hills and Terai (plains) – were randomly selected (Jumla and Sankhuwasabha from the mountains, Rolpa and Kathmandu from the hills, and Rautahat and Jhapa from plains). The first in each pair of districts had the highest and the second had the lowest dropout rates. Six schools were selected (one in each district) using a random sampling method from the 482 high schools in the six districts (see Table 1). Ninety-six (49 male and 47 female) participants were selected from seven respondent categories using a random sampling method (except for dropped-out students and their parents): students in school, teachers, headteachers, parents of students in school, and members of staff from the district education offices. For dropped-out students and their parents, a snowballing method of sampling was used. Male students and teachers for interviews were selected randomly from the total male population and female respondents for those categories were selected from the female population (see Table 1).

4.2 Measures

Ethical approval was sought and obtained from the University of Dundee from where this research was carried out. Informed consent was obtained from all respondents and semi-structured, open-ended, in-depth interviews were conducted in the respondents' own language – Nepali. The design of the interview schedule was based on three sources. One

Table 1. Details of category-wise sample size for qualitative interviews.

Districts Respondents	Jumla	Rolpa	Rautahat	Kathmandu	Sankhuwasabha	Jhapa	TOTAL
DEO* staff	2 (1 M*,1 F*)	2 M	2 M	2 (1 M 1 F)	2 M	2 M	12
Teachers	4 (2 M 2 F)	4 (2 M 2 F)	4 (2 M 2 F)	4 (2 M 2 F)	4 (2 M 2 F)	4 (2 M 2 F)	24
Head Teacher	1 M	1 M	1 M	1 M	1 M	1 F	6
Parents: School Pupils	2 (1 M 1 F)	2 (1 M 1 F)	2 (1 M 1 F)	2 (1 M 1 F)	2 (1 M 1 F)	2 (1 M 1 F)	12
Parents: Dropout Pupils	2 (1 M 1 F)	-	2 F	1 M	2 (1 M 1 F)	-	7
Pupils in School	4 (2 M 2 F)	4 (2 M 2 F)	4 (2 M 2 F)	4 (2 M 2 F)	4 (2 M 2 F)	4 (2 M 2 F)	24
Dropout Students	1 F	2 (1 M 1 F)	4 F	1 F	1 F	2 F	11
TOTAL	16	15	19	15	16	15	96

*M = Male *F = Female *DEO = District Education Office

was the literature review – interview questions used by previous studies were carefully examined to see if they were relevant to the research questions of this study. The second resource was the research questions and sub-questions themselves – these were key resources in developing interview topics. The third resource was statistics and literature about education that the government of Nepal published.

4.3 Research positionality

There are several aspects of the position of the first author as a data-gatherer that might be relevant. The author is a male Nepali, who had been involved in teaching in Nepal for over fifteen years before he moved to the UK for university studies. Therefore, he was familiar with the teaching environment in Nepali schools. He shared an understanding of some socio-cultural beliefs and practices with some of the participants. At the same time, when he was collecting data, he was in Nepal as a researcher from a UK university. Therefore, the researcher's insider-outsider position and the influence of hierarchies of culture and power on knowledge construction (Robinson-Pant and Singal 2013) were important aspects of positionality. Ethnically, he belongs to a Brahmin family, which in the caste hierarchy is in the highest position. Personally, the researcher was opposed to such hierarchical division and tried to avoid all behaviour associated with it. However, it is acknowledged that this also could impact the response of participants from different caste backgrounds.

Elwood and Martin (2000, 651) suggest that 'race, class, family status, ethnicity and other social identities are important sources of differential power that shape relations between researchers and participants even if they share similar national or local identities'. The researcher's looks revealed his ethnicity, as people with Indo-Aryan roots such as Brahmin and Chhetris bear different looks from those with Tibeto-Burman roots such as Tamang, Limbu and Rai. Being aware of this, the author relied more on being a Nepali and his ability to speak with them in the Nepali language, and on Nepali culture that encouraged participants to cooperate with someone who comes from afar as a guest (Rothchild 2012).

4.4 Procedure and analysis

The interviews were audio-recorded and the audio files were saved in a password-protected computer, while the files in the audio recorder were deleted. The principal researcher listened to the interviews carefully and translated and transcribed them into English. It was decided that a computer-assisted analytical tool (NVivo) would be used (Jones 2007). Importantly, the researcher was clear that the use of software was not to control the analysis of the data but to utilise the facility provided by it to systematise and ease the process.

The issue of the translation's reliability was addressed by an inter-rater reliability test. Audio recordings of two interviews were provided to another Nepali researcher who had the required level of English language competence. The respondents' anonymity was maintained. The two versions were checked by the researcher and co-researcher. It was found that both versions contained the same contents.

The transcribing of the 96 audio recordings gave the researcher an idea of the broad topics. Note-taking of prominent issues began. Initially two broad areas – school system factors and socio-cultural factors – were identified. Several themes were grouped under each of the broad categories during the interpretation of the scripts. NVivo automatically ranked the prominent themes in order based on their frequency of occurrence in the data. Thus, comparison of the views of different categories of the respondent was possible.

5. Results

The findings of this study make clear that girls' leaving school early is caused by a structural system of exclusion and disadvantage around patriarchy. The existing cultural norms within families in Nepali society caused exclusion.

5.1 Gendered educational preference, parental education and girls' schooling

Eighteen respondents (teachers, district education staff and students) stressed that gender preference in terms of educational access was significantly stronger in working-class people. There were two ways for such preference to cause girls' exclusion from successful completion of their school education: the first was to pull elder daughters from school to take charge of younger siblings while parents went away to work. The second is that parents pulled elder daughters out of school and put them to work to support household finances and to educate their younger male siblings.

A mother of three daughters and one son revealed her preference of education for a son while sacrificing daughters' schooling.

I could not afford to send all of them to school. Although the school fee is free, I needed money for the uniforms and stuff. Only one daughter got some scholarship but that was not enough. So, I found some nice families for them to work in. They are happy there. I get some help from them. I have a plan to educate this son as much as I can.

- Mother of girls who dropped out (Terai region)

The interviewee supports Rothchild's (2005) finding that gender preference is practised when the financial burden forces parents to choose between daughters and sons for participation and persistence in schools. This is evidence of how even mothers tend to

embrace the patriarchal value system by putting daughters to work and sending sons to school. This finding is in line with Khanal (2018), who found that educational expenditure influences parental preference about their children's education.

Parental awareness was a prominent issue that a large number of respondents discussed. Out of 43, 16 (five DEO staff, four headteachers and seven teachers) stressed that the most important cause of female dropout from schools was the level of parental awareness. This was influenced by inherited ideas from the age-old socio-cultural tradition that defined a power relation between male and female members of a family: males were superior to females and females' primary function was child-bearing (Stromquist 1990; LeVine 2006). Such traditional ideas made parents think that daughters needed only to be literate and that was enough for them. In the narration below, the interviewee discusses how the parents' general perception worked towards female exclusion.

Many parents do not know why education is important. They think girls need to be literate and that's enough. They ask their daughters to leave studies to help with household work. -
Female teacher from Terai

It was found that awareness towards female education was poor in parents of low economic status. Gender choice in educating children favoured male children (Adhikari 2013; Siddiqui and Iram 2007). The respondents argued that most parents from low economic family backgrounds had a low level of awareness of female education. The interviewees' responses closely inter-linked educational preferences, household economy and parental awareness. This finding goes along with Adhikari (2013), who found parental awareness one of the most significant factors interacting with household economy and parental education causing girls' exclusion from school education.

Two DEO staff also linked the family's economic status with parents' awareness towards family planning. Such parents were not aware of child spacing or family planning, resulting in a large number of children. Consequently, daughters were compelled to quit their studies. Here is what one of the staff said:

Poor people tend to have a large family. This is because of a lack of awareness about family health and education. Normally, they have many children, at least six or seven. The parents have to go to the fields to work, and the elder siblings will have to look after the younger ones.

The questions are: why should they think only daughters should look after their younger siblings? Why should they have so many children without proper spacing (having a baby every year)?

- Male DEO staff from the mountains

This participant made connections between parental awareness, patterns of childbearing and bias against girls in a family. All these factors had a negative association with girls' schooling, which goes along with the findings of LeVine (2006), Adhikari (2013) and Jain (2006).

Five teachers said that parental level of education significantly determined whether or not female students completed their school education. Their logic was that educated parents knew why they should educate their children, but the uneducated parents from rural societies could not think beyond everyday chores.

Four parents did not agree that all uneducated parents were unaware of the value of education for their children. Two mothers said they regretted that they had no education but they were determined to ensure that their children, both sons and daughters, had a good education. Two other parents said that there were two types of parents: some of them cared about children's education and others ignored this.

Six students voiced concerns similar to teachers. These students as in the following quotation argued that parents with no education thought in a traditional way, which caused difficulty to female students. The perspective presented by the participant here is consistent with Shrestha and Shrestha (2020), who found a positive correlation between mothers' education and daughters' schooling.

The parents are not aware of education and its benefits. Lack of awareness is among the parents who have no education.

-Female student in school from hills

The parents' disagreement about intergenerational links between parental education and daughters' probability of completing school education highlighted two different realities. One group of participants believed that parents' education weakened gender stereotyping in terms of daughters' schooling (Azam 2015), whereas the participants in the other group said that uneducated mothers were more concerned about educating their daughters.

5.2 Effect of early marriage, religion, dowry and patriarchal norms

Marriage was found to have a significant effect on girls' schooling. Out of 39 respondents who commented about marriage, 11 argued that socio-cultural traditions about relationship and marriage were to blame for girls' dropout from schools. One of the education office staff discussed how relationship and marriage was a major obstacle to girls' education.

The girls elope with boys and quit studies. The reason for this is they wish to marry but the parents do not allow them. Our social culture does not allow boys and girls to have relations openly. For that reason, they run away and marry themselves. They never return to schools because it is rare for girls to continue schooling after they get married.

-DEO staff from hills

It is clear from the above quote that socio-cultural norms imposed limitations on normal youth behaviours such as developing relationships, forcing them to marry early and quit their education. Three teachers said that it might be possible for boys to go back to school and continue their studies after they got married, because boys could cope with scepticism and unwanted attention, and they did not have any extra responsibility at home, but it was almost impossible for girls to go back to school. The family system also discouraged girls to go back to school after marriage.

Thus, it was found that the norms and values of patriarchy constantly caused girls' exclusion from education. Four teachers discussed why early marriages were happening. They focused their discussion on various socio-cultural and socio-psychological factors, such as parents' concept of fulfilling their responsibility by marrying their daughters off as early as they could, and adolescent girls' desire to escape an unwelcome family environment. Here is what one of them said:

Some girls get married when they are still at school. There are three reasons for marriage. First, the girls find boys and run away. Second, the parents find a good match, a businessman, or someone in foreign employment, and prefer such a suit over the daughter's school education. Normally, daughters, except for some girls, do not oppose their parents. And the third, the household environment is so unwelcome that some girls think of escaping by finding a match for themselves and quitting their education. -Male teacher from mountains

The participants thus raised several issues about patriarchal norms towards marriage. The influence of such beliefs on early marriage exacerbated the situation for girls. Seven respondents (two DEO staff, three teachers and one headteacher) discussed the influence of religion on gender bias at home and in the wider socio-cultural context. They said that as Hindus were over 80% of the population, the influence of Hinduism was widespread in society, but the influence of other religions was negligible. The headteacher said that Hinduism imposed a caste system and a book such as *Manusmriti* considered women subordinate to men.

Although the influence of Manusmriti has grown weaker because of modern education and growing awareness in common people, gender bias remains. The root of this is Hinduism and Hindu scriptures such as Manusmriti. There are a good number of Brahmins who think that Manusmriti was Brahma's voice. Manusmriti states that a woman is not an independent human being but subordinate to a man. And parents secure a heavenly abode after their death if they marry their daughter off before her first menstruation. For that reason, some parents arrange their daughters' marriage quite early.

- Headteacher from mountains

The above quote resonates with Sekine and Hodgkin's (2017) conclusion that early marriage was the principal driver of girls' dropout.

Linked to marriage was the issue of dowry that further complicated the prospect of girls' successful schooling. Three respondents (two DEO staff and one teacher) representing the *madhesi* (natives of indigenous people in the plains) community of southern Nepal discussed the effect of dowry on girl students' school dropout. Two DEO staff said that the practice of dowry was a strong factor in the southern plains of Nepal. They argued that the parents wanted their daughters to leave school early because less-educated daughters were likely to be married to less educated boys who would demand less dowry.

The local reason specific to the Madhesi community is of dowry. You invest in girls' education, then when you get her a husband, it should be the one who has more education than that of your daughter. An educated boy demands an expensive dowry. Most people think of that and want to keep their daughters just literate. So, the dowry is the most important factor.

- Male DEO Staff from Terai

The teacher however said that the issue of dowry was not limited to one ethnic group, caste or community, but was more acute in the *Madhesi* community. He said that dowry was a cause of female students' school dropout and a source of domestic violence.

Some parents want their daughters to find boys themselves to elope with. They think if there is no formal marriage, they do not have to provide a dowry. They do not care about their daughters' education. Dowry also brings tragedy to marriages. Some girls are badly treated at their husband's house because they do not satisfy their husbands' family with the dowry.

- Female Teacher from Terai

Both quotations above clarify that the financial burden of dowry as a cultural norm increases the likelihood of girls' educational exclusion by creating hurdles for girls' schooling. Gupta (2019) also found that most of the rural *Madhesi* parents preferred to send their sons to school instead of daughters. Although the government incentive programmes seemed to hold some promise to encourage parents to send their daughters to schools, the practice of dowry pulled them out of school.

5.3 Effect of gender preference during internal migration

Internal and external migration is not limited to a particular group or class of people – it occurs among all kinds of people. However, the results indicated that females' school education was affected mostly among working-class people. Seven respondents (one parent, one headteacher, one student in school and four teachers) argued that the movement of parents from one place to another had a strong effect on female students' dropout from schools. According to them, working-class people did not have a permanent job and moved from place to place for work.

Four teachers said that migration posed challenges in terms of cost and social integration, and children faced even bigger challenges. The teachers also said that the main challenge for girl students was that of safety.

The first reason for leaving school is migration. The working-class people move from work to work. So, once they move, they take their children with them. Some of these people never send their daughters to school in the new place. Some female students do not feel comfortable and safe in the new place and stop going to school themselves. -Female Teacher from Terai

Participants indicated a lack of school education policy to deal with the transition for girls and boys while they migrate to a new location and the issue of safety was very much at the centre. A headteacher argued that there was a strong relation between migration and female student dropout. According to him, migration played a significant role, but other factors such as parents' awareness and parents' economic status also worked against females. He said that the issue of parents' economic status had a strong relationship to migration and educational gender preference.

5.4 Effect of superstitious belief

The issue of superstitious belief and its effect on girls' schooling was raised by some participants from rural locations. Although not raised by many participants, it was important and interesting. Three respondents (two students in school and one teacher)

mentioned people's superstitious beliefs as a factor in female students' school dropout. Both students provided examples of how such beliefs led parents to a wrong decision, meaning their daughters were compelled to leave school education.

A grade nine girl had to leave school. She had weak health. She fainted at school now and then. Her parents made her stop going to school. She might have had some health problems. Instead of consulting a doctor, they used a local witch doctor who said she was haunted by a bad spirit, needed to move to another place and needed to get married. They acted upon the advice.

- Female student from hills

These respondents also mentioned people's practice of visiting local astrologers with their family members to obtain *janma kundali* (horoscopes). The astrologers examined the effect of the stars on people's lives, foretold people's future and prescribed some actions. The respondents said that such incidents had an effect on female students' dropout.

A girl from my neighbourhood left school when she was in grade eight. Her parents had shown her horoscope to a local astrologer who predicted that if her marriage was delayed, she would have a fatal accident. They believed it. Then coincidentally a man came to her parents with a marriage proposal. They fixed a marriage for her immediately.

-Female student from Terai

These quotations raise a question: why do these parents put their superstitious beliefs ahead of their children's health and education? At a deeper level, it can be inferred that it was because of the way their belief system was shaped by their family history in relation to their participation in education. The role of the school system and educational policy against such incidents will take time to have an effect.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that a complex system of patriarchal structure has worked to cause girls' exclusion from education. Women's oppression has been inherent in the structure of Nepali society and determines power relations and a gendered division of labour. The findings support Omwami's (2011) argument that poverty and patriarchy tend to work to limit educational opportunities for women and girls. The findings consolidated under the socio-cultural exclusion model (see 6.1) suggests that structures of male domination permeate through educational policy, political interference in educational institutions, household practices of division of labour and educational preference for sons.

Exclusion models provide a useful theoretical lens in interpreting the socio-cultural system working against girls' school education. Feminist theorists argue that patriarchy and power is the cause of female oppression and female subordination. They see it as an interaction between economy, class and gender that helps perpetuate gender inequality (e.g. Stromquist 1990). The root of such arguments lies in the structure of patriarchy as a mechanism in Nepali society that causes an unequal distribution of power which results in unequal access to opportunities.

The findings of this study do not support the claim that certain ethnicities such as those with Tibeto-Burman roots have considerable freedom and access to resources for girls (Adhikari 2013), specifically in relation to educational gain. The findings of the current study reveal that female students' school retention is affected by caste and ethnicities and even the girls from Tibeto-Burman roots drop out.

6.1 Socio-cultural-exclusion model

This model unfolds a range of gender-related issues that are prevalent in Nepali society, explaining why female students give up hope and drop out. The model includes findings such as unequal labour division at home between a son and a daughter, preference of education of the son over the daughter (sons go to schools considered of better quality and daughters to public schools), male members of society being in leadership roles, the parents' intention of getting their daughters married early, daughters being the victim of parents' superstitious beliefs, the dowry system affecting daughters' education, and the effect of caste on a daughter's education. This model suggests that the issues that reinforce socio-cultural exclusion in Nepali society are deeply rooted in the family system and social environment.

Female students' retention was found to be low in the disadvantaged marginalised caste groups of people such as '*dalits*', *madhesis* and *janajatis*. The people from less privileged communities were found to have a low level of educational awareness and were victims of superstitious religious beliefs. The dowry system affected female students in the *madhesi* communities, as this system gave parents a financial burden at their marriages, forcing them to pull their daughters out of school and marry them off early. This explains how the structural system of patriarchy has exploited females and excluded them from educational gain.

6.2 Economic-political-exclusion model

This theoretical model consolidates findings that explain the economic and political provision of the government institution and policy in relation to gender-balanced schooling outcome. Interestingly, such results confirm that the government mechanisms reinforce patriarchal gender values while failing to address the issues of poverty and political hegemonic structures. The empirical findings of this study have suggested that the implementation of education policy has failed to address the issues about making school structures safe and friendly for both boys and girls, and scholarship provisions for girls have not addressed diversity in terms of caste and economic backgrounds (Robinson-Pant 2004; Dahal, Topping, and Levy 2019). Bennet (2005) interprets this as the government's unwillingness to represent and articulate the demands of less powerful Nepalis. The findings uncover the effect of widespread poverty in Nepal. The government has been unable to bring in policies to improve the economic level of people under the poverty line. This has affected the school environment and reinforced exclusion.

7. Conclusion

School education provides a base for girls' mobility towards further education and employment. Lack of education and training opportunities results in employer biases in staff selection and limited mobility (Mahat 2003). Education and skills enable girls to make choices about themselves, challenge the discriminatory practices by taking the lead in the decision-making process and increasing access to economic opportunities and resources. That is why education is crucial for Nepali girls' social mobility and empowerment.

This study concludes with several important findings that will have implications for future researchers, policymakers and practitioners. Firstly, it is clear that patriarchal socio-cultural values determine educational outcomes for female students. Gender inequality permeates all kinds of socio-cultural activities and the teaching and learning context. The major barrier of a gendered hierarchy (MacKinnon 1979) within the family system and in the wider society not only caused an imbalance in labour division between male and female members at home but also led to the consideration that education for females was not important. A vast majority of respondents revealed that the male head of the family made major household decisions. Such power relations within the family favoured sons in terms of educational participation over daughters. The socio-cultural exclusion model also included factors such as caste and ethnicity. Female students' retention was found to be low in socio-economically disadvantaged and marginalised groups of people. The people from less privileged communities were found to have a low level of awareness of education and were affected by superstitious religious beliefs. The dowry system affected female students in the *Madhesi* communities, as this system gave parents a financial burden. All of these factors help to explain the role that patriarchal values play in the educational exclusion of females.

On some issues, children's views differed from those of adult participants (teachers and parents) regarding the level of support and encouragement provided by teachers and elders. Such contradictory discourse (Van Den Berg 2005) indicates the rich variety of perspectives on the problem. Nonetheless, there are clear main findings, and these will provide useful direction to future policymakers, researchers and practitioners.

The extent of these findings and the associated theoretical models contribute substantially to our knowledge about gender and education, especially in a developing country such as Nepal. The empirical evidence here establishes that patriarchal systems at household and political levels are the principal factors in girls' drop-out from education in Nepal, reinforced by socio-economic disadvantage, poor levels of parental education, and superstition. These patriarchal systems are often also subscribed to by female parents. For the future, the theoretical models will provide a useful framework for further research studies on girls' education in Nepal. We believe that the findings and recommendations of this study will contribute to the chances of girls successfully completing school education in Nepal.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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