



Social norms for adolescent girls in Nepal: slow but positive progress

Country briefing

Fiona Samuels, ODI Research Fellow and Anita Ghimire, Research fellow, NCCR

Key messages

- Research in Nepal reveals positive changes in the social norms that shape the lives of adolescent girls. These include the reduction in child marriage; the growing value being placed on the education of adolescent girls – some of whom now combine schooling with married life; shrinking family size; and signs in one district (Ilam) that girls now have a greater say in who they will, or will not, marry.
- These positive changes, together with improved access to technology – mobile phones in particular – mean that adolescent girls feel a greater sense of personal growth and well-being than their mothers and grandmothers.
- However, discriminatory norms persist: violence against women is commonplace and even expected. And girls – particularly high-caste girls in the district of Doti – are still expected to abandon their education to do household chores, marry early and have male children.
- A few broad packages of policies and interventions, targeted specifically to adolescent girls, would help to address their persistent and historic lack of gender justice in such areas as education, self-determination and economic empowerment.

1 Introduction: why focus on adolescent girls in Nepal?

Before, education was considered for earning money only, now slowly the thinking has changed. Yes, it is a means to success, and even if nothing happens you are educated. People value education
(Younger adolescents at a focus group discussion, Doti)

Nepal has made impressive progress on human development, human rights and gender parity over the past decade, recording the fastest overall progress worldwide on the Human Development Index (HDI) (UNCT, 2012). The end of years of conflict has paved the way for the greater participation of women in the country's economy and in its political life (Ghimire, 2012). Despite this progress, however, Nepal's location on the Gender-related Development Index (GDI) shows that girls and women still occupy a very weak position in society.

Challenges to the well-being of girls in Nepal include the persistence of restrictive and discriminatory social norms and institutions. Many of these are guided by Hindu notions of chastity and honour that are applied to women and girls more than to men and boys. These restrictive norms shape Nepal's social structures and power relations within and beyond the home.

Such norms are not, however, static. Their impact on each girl varies according to her socioeconomic conditions, caste, ethnicity, religion, her location and her age. For example, the gender norms that confront girls from indigenous groups such as the Gurung, Rai and Limbu are less discriminatory than those faced by high-caste Hindu girls, such as those from the Brahmin and Chhetri castes, or even by low-caste Hindu girls, such as Dalits. Given that ethnic minority girls in many countries face greater discrimination than those from majority populations, this intriguing finding reinforces the value of research on social norms in Nepal.

As part of a broader study (see Box 1), this briefing presents findings from Nepal. Using qualitative approaches, it examines five spheres of an adolescent girl's life – her education, economic strength, physical health, psychosocial well-being and her political and civic participation – that affect (and that can be affected by) her capabilities (Harper et al., 2012).

Box 1: Gender justice for adolescent girls: a new research initiative

This study is part of a multi-year DFID-funded policy research programme on gender justice for adolescent girls. The programme examines four countries: Ethiopia, Nepal, Uganda and Viet Nam. ODI, in partnership with national researchers, is exploring the key capabilities that shape girls' current well-being and future potential. Focusing on economic, educational, physical, psycho-emotional and civic participation capabilities, it aims to shine a light on discriminatory social norms, make visible the often hidden experiences of adolescent girls and identify how policy and programme actors can better respond to their needs and priorities.

2 Country context: Ilam and Doti districts



Two districts – Ilam in Eastern Nepal and Doti in Far-Western Nepal – were selected for this study on the basis of criteria set by ODI,¹ the analysis of national and sub-national data and consultations with stakeholders at national level (Figure 1). In each district a rural area and an urban area were selected. Ilam is a highly-developed district in human and gender terms as well as in its infrastructure and services, while Doti is one of the least developed parts of Nepal. While the population of Ilam is diverse in terms of its ethnicity, religion and its caste groups composition, Doti is predominantly Hindu, and its people are mostly Brahmin, Chhetri and Dalits. Ilam has 96 national NGOs and 1 international NGO working on the ground, while Doti has 182 national NGOs and 35 international donors.

The main sources of income for people in Ilam (in Jamuna and Barbote respectively) are agriculture and dairy, both for subsistence and sale. Migration to the fertile plains of the Terai is common from Barbote, as is in-migration to the village from other districts, given its high agricultural productivity. There is considerable cross-border trading in Jamuna as a result of its proximity to the Indian border.

As well as having high in-migration from other districts of the Far-Western region, Doti is characterised by its very high rate of male migration to India. The urban site in Doti (Dipayal Silgadi) is a hub for trading and formal work opportunities (in government and NGOs) as well as informal labour. The rural site (Ranagaon) relies on subsistence agriculture and remittances from India, with many men also migrating to other Terai districts for employment. Doti in general, and Ranagaon in particular, is characterised by a lack of adult men of productive age as a result of migration. In both Ilam and Doti, young men, in particular, have started to migrate to Malaysia and the Gulf countries for work in recent years.

¹ Criteria included presence of rural and urban contexts, a variety of ethnic/religious groups, presence/absence of international/national NGOs, and contexts with more/less development.

3 Key findings

3.1 The growing value placed on girls' education

What we expected to find

On the basis of our literature review², we expected to find that, while overall literacy rates had improved, girls would still be at a disadvantage when compared to boys, that there would be disparities between girls in rural and urban areas and that the older the adolescent girl, the more likely she would be to drop out of school. The literature also showed that girls dropped out of school because they had to carry out household chores and because of the perception that girls needed to be married off.

Box 2: Persistent and changing gender norms in Ilam and Doti Districts

Persistent norms

'I was good in studies, but I had to drop out owing to excessive work at home. It was not because of my parents. It was my decision. My mother is not healthy. I am the eldest and the only grown-up child at home, so I could help in the household work. So I left my studies.' (Adolescent girl, Ilam)

'I agree with my parents that my sister needs to marry after she completes [Grade] 12 otherwise people in the village will start talking and accuse us of keeping a grown-up girl at home.' (Adolescent boy, Doti).

'Men spend more time playing cards and drinking alcohol. Wife beating is normal in society [...] they say if they don't beat the wife, the wife will dominate them...' (Adolescent girl, Doti)

'Everyone knows two children are god's gift, but if they have a daughter, they keep on having children. What is the use of education?' (Youth volunteer, Doti)

Changing norms

'Previously the old people were against it (education) they now say you should give them equal rights, you should also send your girl child to school.' (Headmaster, Doti)

'Before, there was not so much stress on education as there is now. Before, education was considered for earning money only, now slowly the thinking has changed. Yes, it is a means to success, and even if nothing happens you are educated. People value education.' (Younger adolescents at a focus group discussion, Doti)

'Even if they have two daughters they are satisfied. They say if a son can do anything daughters can also do it.' (Older woman, Ilam)

'Yes, I feel that my parents should ask us when they choose a groom for me. It is better, if they ask me. And also if the groom considers my interests.' (Adolescent girl, Ilam)

² Full details of the literature review can be found in Ghimire and Samuels, 2013.

What we found – persistent norms

While parents claimed to give equal emphasis to the school enrolment of both their sons and daughters, when it came to higher education, parents in rural areas placed greater emphasis on their sons. There is still the expectation that as they get older, girls need to carry out household chores, which limits their time for studies and causes school drop-out. Older adolescent girls also reported pressure to marry, particularly those from the higher-caste groups (Brahmin and Chhetri) and from the lowest-caste group – the Dalits. This was particularly the case in Doti.

Although the study uncovered little gender-based discrimination and violence in schools, and interviews with adolescents and head teachers showed the positive discrimination that was taking place, such as putting girls in leading positions in the classroom and having them anchor schools' cultural programmes, the girls themselves felt hesitant to participate and to be vocal in the classroom. This was particularly the case in Doti and amongst married adolescent girls. Additional challenges that pushed girls to miss classes or drop out of school completely included: restricted mobility, with parents reluctant to send them to schools far from home; the lack of appropriate toilets at school; social practices related to menstruation; and the stigma of studying with students of a younger age, although this was often a perception felt by the girls themselves, rather than a view imposed by the community.



What we found – changing norms

While there are some differences between the two sites, there has been, in general, an increasingly positive attitude about the value of girls' education. There was once an unquestioned acceptance that girls had to do housework and had no time for study. If they were educated, it was thought, they would be seen as 'witches' or that they would elope. Now a girl's education is seen as a route to success and even if a girl gets married, this does not necessarily stop her going to school. Increasingly, both sets of parents are seen to negotiate for her continued education. However, according to our interviewees, girls usually drop out once they have a child, or put their education on hold until their children grow up, because they no longer have the time.

Part of the changing value placed on girls' education can be attributed to its prioritisation by the Nepalese Government through its School Sector Reform programme, which has provided incentives in the form cash or oil for parents who keep their girls in school, while also raising parental awareness of the benefits of educating their daughters. Even though this programme is now being phased out, its impact has trickled down to influence community attitudes.

3.2 Limitations on economic independence

What we expected to find

As a result of our literature review, we expected to find more adolescent girls than boys involved in economic activities and most women and girls involved in informal self-employment (where they are paid less than men for the same work), sometimes facing sexual harassment in the workplace, or stuck in unpaid household work. In addition, we expected to find that migration was a critical economic activity for youth, and in particular for young men.



What we found – persistent norms

There is a clear division of household tasks along gender lines, with cooking and cleaning assigned to women and girls, while men and boys carry out work that is seen as more physically demanding, such as digging fields. While few girls engage in income-generating activities outside agriculture, those who do tend to take on work that is seen as unskilled, such as carrying stones and bricks. Boys, on the other hand, work in areas seen as more skilled, such as carpentry and masonry. There are particularly stringent restrictions on the mobility of high-caste girls (Brahmin and Chhetri) in Doti because of parental fears for their physical safety, coupled with fears that girls ‘will lose control, become involved with boys and ultimately elope’ if they are far from home. This limits their work options and they can only take up jobs close to home.

Within agriculture, the amount of money earned depends on the amount of work done: it does not vary by gender (an average wage being \$2.2 a day in both study sites). But outside agriculture, there is a marked gender difference, with boys earning an average of \$3.31 to \$5.52 a day while girls earn around \$2.76 a day.

In Doti, and to a lesser extent in Ilam, migration is the main income-generating activity undertaken by older adolescents – almost exclusively boys. Where girls did migrate, they were not expected to do this just to earn money to send to their family. Instead, migration was seen as a way to fulfil their own needs or for other purposes, such as education, marriage or accompanying female members of their extended family.

What we found – changing norms

While there are gender differences in the kind of work that males and females do, these differences start to emerge only in later adolescence and in most cases, there was no gender stereotyping of work in the earlier years of adolescence. While household tasks are gendered, there are times when this division is less strict and, in Doti in particular, women and girls do undertake ‘male’ work, such as digging fields, because most men have migrated for work to India. However, the reverse does not hold true: men would not be seen carrying out ‘female’ tasks, as these tend to be undervalued.

3.3 Physical/sexual health and violence against adolescent girls

Physical/sexual health

What we expected to find on physical health

The literature revealed a range of expected behaviours and attitudes around life-cycle processes for girls that were, for the most part, negative and exclusionary. These included practices around menstruation, child marriage, expectations of virginity for girls upon marriage, arranged marriages, early pregnancy and a preference for sons. There are, however, variations across all of these according to a girl's level of education, her caste, her ethnicity and whether she lives in a rural or urban household.

What we found – persistent norms

Traditional practices and beliefs around menstruation continue to affect a large number of adolescent girls. In both study districts, menstruating girls cannot touch water and food, eat certain types of food (milk products) enter the kitchen or sleep in certain parts of the house. Girls, for the most part, accept these restrictions, but the extent to which they abide by them varies. Similarly, girls with less educated parents, belonging to certain castes (Brahmins, Chhetri and Dalits) and living in rural areas in Doti are/need to be particularly strict about the practices.

Premarital sex remains a taboo in Nepali society. It is not discussed openly and any girl who engages in it is said to bring disgrace to the family; boys, on the other hand, who have premarital sex are judged far less harshly. And while we found some positive changes in these norms, in Doti in particular an unmarried older adolescent girl living at home is still considered to be a burden. Finally, while polygamy is decreasing, partly because the law forbids it, it still exists and is justified in the eyes of the community as a valid response to female infertility.

What we found – changing norms

Although taboos around menstruation remain, girls in Doti who once had to sleep in a separate shed during menstruation can now sleep at the house of a friend who is also menstruating, or in a separate room in their own house. This may be only a small step forward, but it is an important one.

Adolescent girls are marrying later than their mothers and grandmothers, and particularly in Ilam. Here girls and boys are marrying later – at the age of 21.43, on average – than girls and boys in Doti, at 17.72. Again, particularly in Ilam, girls now expect to have a say in choosing their husband, even though parents prefer arranged marriages. Another positive change is the closing age gap between husbands and wives, which has fallen from up to 19 years to approximately 5-8 years, mostly amongst the higher caste groups – Brahmins and Chhetris.

As a result of marrying at a later age, the age at which girls give birth has also increased, from 13 to 19. So has the gap between birth (increasing from an average of 1.5 years to 4 years), and the number of children per family has declined from an average of 5 to 2. In Ilam there appears to be no preference for a son, but this was less clear in Doti. Finally, as a result of free maternal delivery services, as well as the additional travel incentive of Rs 1,000 (\$10) provided by the Government, most births now take place in health facilities.

Awareness of family planning services has increased and contraceptives are easily available in both sites. These are used mostly by married adolescents and women, usually to limit the number of children after having given birth to the desired number. Safe abortion services are also available in the districts and, according to our respondents, are used by women after the failure of family planning. It was not clear whether sex-selective abortion was happening – two adolescents in Doti mentioned that a couple had travelled to India to find

out whether they were pregnant with a girl or a boy. However, while most unmarried adolescents know about contraception and where to get the services and information, they do not dare to follow up on this for fear of taboos and stigma. Similarly, any discussion around abortion for unmarried girls is strictly taboo.

Violence against adolescent girls

What we expected to find on violence against adolescent girls

Despite changing trends and avenues that are now opening up for redress, we expected to find girls and women still being subjected to gender-based violence, with most of this violence being meted out by people they know. Domestic violence, in particular, continues to be thought of, by both men and women, as a socially acceptable way of men maintaining control and domination over women.



What we found – persistent norms

Women and girls continue to face gender-based violence, mostly at the hands of people who are in regular contact with them. When a girl marries and moves into her husband's home, she may face abuse from her husband and, particularly in Doti, from her mother-in-law. She can, for instance, be verbally abused, and even expelled from the house, if she is not thought to be performing the household tasks expected of her. Wife beating was also found to persist, most frequently in Doti and among older couples. Women are often afraid to report domestic violence, either because they do not see this violence as a violation of their rights or because they cannot risk being thrown out of the house, given their financial and social dependence on their husbands. Finally, there are reports of adolescent girls who go to towns for education, being abused and exploited by their local guardians, and eventually lured into in sex work.

What we found – changing norms

There have always been informal strategies to cope with gender-based violence, such as talking to peers or female relatives and these continue. In addition, a system of safe houses has now been set up by the Ministry of Women, Children and Social Welfare, together with female-only police cells, to support the victims of violence. This has contributed to a reduction of domestic violence, with more cases being reported than ever before. Nevertheless, domestic violence still persists.

3.4 Psychosocial well-being and its linkages with other spheres of life

What we expected to find

Given the underlying importance of issues around caste and religion, we expected that these would affect the behaviours, feelings and general well-being of adolescent girls. We also expected these issues to be closely linked to, and intersect with, the other spheres of their lives, from education to domestic violence.

What we found – persistent norms

Social norms and notions of what makes a girl a ‘good’ daughter or woman continue to constrain the ability of adolescent girls to realise their capacities. Girls are expected to be submissive, docile and shy, and not to be outspoken, opinionated or mischievous. Similarly, their behaviour is linked closely to notions of family honour, shame and prestige, with girls feeling that they are under the close and relentless scrutiny of society. This leaves a girl under constant pressure to think about the family name and honour in every aspect of her daily life, from the clothes she wears to the way she behaves in public. A girl cannot, therefore, stay overnight at a friend’s house. She cannot be seen to roam around and she cannot be seen talking or interacting with boys. While boys can express their sexuality and sexual curiosity, girls are under great pressure to conceal any interest about sex, sexual activity or sexual appeal. Fear of being ostracised from society stops girls challenging established norms, but does not stop them from criticising and questioning both the norms and themselves.



What we found – changing norms

When compared to their mothers and grandmothers, the adolescent girls of today in both study districts, have higher aspirations for their education and careers. The interactions between parents and their adolescent daughters also appear to be more liberal than their mothers’ and grandmothers’ generations, although this varies according to geography and caste. And, while there is still some distance in father-daughter relationships in terms of, for example, emotional support, this too appears to be changing. Once autocratic fathers are now interacting more closely with their daughters.

3.5 A growing voice and less isolation

What we expected to find

Although there was limited information on the participation of adolescent girls in the public sphere, we found that the real and active participation of adult women remains limited, despite active efforts to encourage female participation in politics.

What we found – persistent norms

While schools are important spaces for girls to participate and share their views, and while they are encouraged to do so by their teachers, the extent of their participation, according to study respondents, depends on how well they are doing with their studies. In reality, the fear of being teased by their classmates limits their active participation in the classroom. Similarly, while NGOs working in these two districts support the wider participation of girls, this does not necessarily translate into their active participation in broader community life.

What we found – changing norms

Although girls have only limited participation in public life, they are taking a more active role in decision-making at home, particularly in Ilam. And in both Ilam and Doti, the older the girl and the more education she has, the more she is asked for her opinion and given a voice. Married girls living alone with their husbands were also found to take on a bigger role in household decisions. And even if a married girl is living with her husband's extended family, she is more likely to be listened to if she has more education than the other members of the household.

Technology has improved the quality of life for both girls and women, particularly access to mobile phones. More and more girls now have access to mobile phones and despite some down-sides, with phones being used for purposes that are seen as 'unnecessary and unhealthy' such as watching films, chatting and sometimes even sex work, they have allowed adolescent girls to maintain and become more connected to their social networks, particularly girls who have married out of their home areas. Two other advances – the availability of rice mills and electricity – have reduced the workloads for women and girls, giving them more time for self-development and education.

Box 3: Persistent differences in the expected behaviour of boys and girls

'They [society] treat girls badly – with contempt. Everyone is always judging your behaviour if you are a girl. Boys are allowed to do everything. They say if boys do anything, it is ok. They are allowed to speak as they like. But if a girl does anything unconventional, the whole community will make it an issue and back-bite the girl and her family [...] For example, boys can go to melas [fairs] and there they tease girls. If we come and tell our mothers or brothers and sisters-in-law about it – that this boy did this – they rebuke us in return. For boys, they will take it as normal and say of course boys will tease girls. "But why did he tease you particularly and not the others – you must have done something – you have to be good yourself, you are bad, that is why he chose you to tease. If you had been good, they would not tease you. Why do you have to go to melas and all? Why can't you just sit at home – how can they tease you if you are home?" (Adolescent girl Doti).

The effects of marriage ... 'Yes, there is difference. There is a lot of difference. When one is married, one cannot act on one's own will. One is caught up in a kind of bondage, one is not free. If one walks around like other girls, speaks and discusses openly with friends like unmarried girls, spends time going around like them, people will say, "Look, she is a woman and yet she does not have any sense, she is just dancing around with girls." They will say, "Look at her way of speaking and way of walking." They mock us, they criticise us. We have to be very careful in speaking, sitting, getting up, everything. I feel we have to be very conscious when we are married. After being married, there are a lot of differences.' (Married adolescent girl, Doti).

4 What this means for policies and programmes

This country briefing shows the positive changes to social norms that are taking place in the lives of adolescent girls in two Nepalese districts, with girls in Ilam, in a sense, leading the way. Change, however, is not uniform and the potential of many adolescent girls is still being constrained by discriminatory social norms and institutions. Policies and programmes need to address a range of contextual, historical and structural factors, including the role of caste and religious identities, the importance of location (rural or urban), and the march of technology and other global forces. Nevertheless, our research proposes a few broad packages of policies and interventions that draw on the opinions of our respondents – packages that would be tailored and targeted for adolescent girls specifically.

Support for education and careers. This package would provide scholarships and information on how to access them; career counselling; and access to skills training for girls who are in or out of school, including English language, computer and accountancy skills training.

Support to self-employment. A package comprising training and guidance on employment opportunities, that include not only traditional areas such as tailoring, beauty or cooking, but also training in mechanics, business management or agriculture; access to microcredit; and programmes and training on managing a business and on entrepreneurship.

Support to personal development. A package of training and guidance on how to deal with: life challenges and changing roles and responsibilities; psychosocial counselling on how to handle relationships with the opposite sex and with in-laws after marriage; adolescent clubs for social activities and leadership training; and public libraries.

Support for safety and parent–adolescent interaction. A programme package to increase awareness for parents and adolescents on gender-based violence, trafficking rules, drug use and alcoholism, and law and justice, as well as personal rights.

Nepal is in a post-conflict transformation phase. This is a critical time to address its past shortcomings, including the historic lack of gender justice. Although issues related to girls and women are beginning to be discussed, those relating specifically to adolescent girls remain largely ignored. A new and strong focus on adolescent girls and gender justice is critical if the country is to meet its development goals and ensure the well-being of its population. There is no magic bullet, and it will take on-going nuanced and carefully thought-through programmes and policy work before the existing beliefs, norms and values that govern the lives of Nepal's adolescent girls equate to those experienced by the country's adolescent boys.



ODI is the UK's leading independent think tank on international development and humanitarian issues.

Our mission is to inspire and inform policy and practice which lead to the reduction of poverty, the alleviation of suffering and the achievement of sustainable livelihoods.

We do this by locking together high-quality applied research, practical policy advice and policy-focused dissemination and debate.

We work with partners in the public and private sectors, in both developing and developed countries.

Nepal Centre for Contemporary Research (NCCR) conducts research on issues regarding state building, conflict, political economy and public policies, peace studies, migration and mobility, human security, climate and environmental security, social protection and basic services, natural resource management, youth and adolescent and livelihood security. NCCR collaborates with several international research institutes and universities to produce knowledge that pushes theoretical boundaries while also contributing to policy formation and practical development of available national and regional capacities. For 13 years (with past and present forms), NCCR has been an active participant in national and international forums, presenting evidence-based research to build platforms for cooperation and advocacy on issues that affect vulnerable populations in Nepal and throughout South Asia. To that end, NCCR focuses on cultivating a strong network of researchers who strive to continue our legacy of investigation and research for positive social change.

References:

Ghimire, A. (2012) 'Rethinking Women in Forced Displacement Situation'. *Refugee Watch: A South Asian Journal on Forced Migration* 37: 30-43.

Ghimire, A. and Samuels, F. with Wagle, S. (2013) *Understanding key capability domains of adolescent girls and gender justice: Findings from Nepal*. London: Overseas Development Institute.

Harper, C., Jones, N., and Watson, C. (2012) 'Transforming the Lives of Girls and Young Women: Conceptual Framework' London: Overseas Development Institute.

National Planning Commission-GIS Unit (2012) *Nepal: Ecological Zone Map*. Kathmandu: GIS Unit.

UNCT (UN Country Team) (2012) 'UN Development Assistance Framework for Nepal 2013-2017'. Kathmandu: UNCT.

Readers are encouraged to reproduce material from ODI Reports for their own publications, as long as they are not being sold commercially. As copyright holder, ODI requests due acknowledgement and a copy of the publication. For online use, we ask readers to link to the original resource on the ODI website. The views presented in this paper are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of ODI.

© Overseas Development Institute 2013. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial Licence (CC BY-NC 3.0).

ISSN: 2052-7209

Overseas Development Institute
203 Blackfriars Road
London SE1 8NJ
Tel +44 (0)20 7922 0300
Fax +44 (0)20 7922 0399

Photo credits:

Page 2: Study site, Dipayal Silgadi of Doti, © ODI 2013

Page 4: FGD with older women in Doti, © ODI 2013

Page 5: Traders weighing tea leaves in Barbote, © ODI 2013

Page 7: Sitting around the fireplace with family members in case study household, Ilam © ODI 2013

Page 8: Boys and girls coming for tuition after school in Ilam © ODI 2013