

Significance of Girl Education: Parents' Perception from Rural Madhesh of Nepal

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In the name of girls' education, various plans, policies and programs have been formulated and implemented by the Government of Nepal. Yet, girls' education in rural Madhesh is full of various challenges. Most of the efforts have not achieved the desired result because of political, socio-cultural and financial barriers. In this regard, this paper attempts to explore the perspective of parents on girl education in rural Madhesh. This study employed a qualitative approach where explorative research design was adopted. Six knowledgeable research participants were selected purposively and in-depth interviews were carried out in form of informal conversation. The finding of the study showed that there is a gender disparity in education in rural Madhesh. Parents view towards girl education is less favorable compared to that of boys. Parents do not have complete willingness to send their daughters to school because of certain financial and social-cultural barriers. Girls from poor and disadvantaged families are mostly deprived of education and parents pay more attention to marry their daughters as early as possible. This study also showed that girls are excluded from education as the result of conventional cultural practices. Parents transfer cultural and social values to their children through the process of parenting socialization. Boys are treated with higher education and girls are excluded. Girls should accept everything without questioning their parents. Even though girls have a strong desire to go to school, they have been denied. Girls are excluded from education not with force but their consent. Despite this fact that many parents are aware of the importance of girl's education, household chores, traditional norms and values, poverty, early marriage and dowry remains a major obstacle.

Keywords: Madhesh, girls, education, and socio-culture values

Introduction

Gender equality in education is one of the central concerns among the policymakers in Nepal. The Government of Nepal is committed to ensure quality education for all and various efforts

have been taken in this direction. The Government of Nepal has invested ample time and money and also formulated laws, policies and programs to ensure gender equality in education for almost half a century. However, there is a high disparity in girl's education in rural Madhesh. Gender equality in education in rural Madhesh is not reported as expected. Large number of Madhesi girl's children is out of school. The consolidated literacy rate of Madhesi population of 15 years and above is 56.6 % where male literacy is 67.6% and female literacy is 56.6% (Nepal Living Standard Survey, 2011 cited in Gupta & Hajariya, 2012). It indicates that there is gender disparity in education in Madhesh. Undoubtedly, awareness on girl education has increased in Madhesh in the last decade. But still, many rural Madheshi parents have an unfavorable attitude influenced by cultural and traditional beliefs. Traditionally, girls' role is assumed to be that of a mother and wife and they are expected to perform only household chores. Amid this scenario, parents perceive that investment in girl's education is simply a waste of money because girls must go to the other home after marriage. In general, it is also opined that education is not much useful for girls. Girls have to perform activities within the four walls of the house rather than outside. Girls are supposed to be a valuable asset to assist in household chores like cleaning, cooking, washing, caring for siblings, cutting grass, fetching firewood, washing clothes, cleaning house and so on. Such perception of parents has created barrier for improving access to girl education in rural Madhesh.

Similarly, dowry is also a major cause of the worsening situation of female education in Madhesh. Dowry encourages girls' parents to arrange their daughters' marriage at an early age (Hart, 2001). More educated parents look for well-educated groom (Saha, 2012). As a result, parents have to pay a large amount of dowry. Age of the bride is another factor that determines the amount of dowry (Reddy, 1994). Because of this, many Madheshi parents feel difficulty to educate their girl children up to higher level. Parents arrange a marriage of daughter at the earliest age possible. Once girls are married, they are overburdened with household chores and no longer have time to attend school. Education is not easily accessible for girls in rural Madhesh because of male dominated social structure. Some families are sending their daughters to school but most of them have hardly completed compulsory education. Parents believe that basic knowledge about letter writing and simple mathematics is sufficient for girls. Similarly, in many families, boys are sent to private schools with full facilities while girls have to go to public schools with limited facilities. In case of financial limitation, parents choose to send their sons to school rather than daughters. Girls are most likely to be taken out of school first if the school fees are very high. Considering all these things in mind, this study attempts to explore parents view on the importance of girls' education in rural Madhesh.

Concept of Madhesh and Madhesi

Introduction to the target study area i.e., Madhesh and its people is a major concern of the study. The term "Madheshi" is one of the contested and controversial terms in Nepal. Madheshi scholars often differentiate between the terms "Madheshi" and "Taraibasi" ("Dweller of the

Tarai region). The former is a historical, political, and sociological concept that refers to groups or communities discriminated by the dominant group whereas the latter denotes any caste or ethnic group, including the dominant caste or group, who lives in the Tarai region. The present study considers the work of Yadav (2007) including Mandal (2008), which argue that the southern part of Nepal - lowland between the border of Indian states of West Bengal, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Uttranchal, and hill-foot, presently called Tarai of Nepal; historically known as Madhesh and Madheshi since ancient time. They resemble to the physical appearance of the Indians. The striking point is that hill people living in Tarai also claim themselves as “Madheshi”. However, this study excludes the hill originated caste/ethnic communities including Muslim, and considers only Madheshi’, used as caste-origin Tarai Hindu groups, reflecting four Varna groups with distinct hierarchical structure within them: Brahmin (Maithali Brahmin, Bhumihaar), Chhetri (Rajput), Vaisya (Yadav, Hajam, Teli, Mahatoo, Nuniya and others).

International commitments

Several international conferences, conventions and summits have been held on the issue of education. The universal declaration of human rights in 1948 states that everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free and compulsory, at least in the elementary stage. Similarly, the convention for elimination of all forms of discrimination against women 1979 obligates the state to eliminate discrimination and reduce dropouts rate among girls in education. Similarly, the convention on the right of children 1989, world conference on education for all (1990), the world summit for children (1990), the fourth world conference on women (1994), the international conference on population and development (1995), and the world social summit (1995) have directly and indirectly mentioned about gender equality in education. the millennium development goal emphasized the achievement of gender equity and the elimination of gender inequality in basic and secondary education by 2005 and at all levels by 2015. Similarly, the sustainable development goal 5 talks about gender equality and Goal 4 talks about quality education ensuring that all girls and boys get completely free, equitable and quality education by 2030. It also talks about eliminating gender disparities in education and ensuring equal access to all levels of education.

National commitments

The history of priority given to girls’ education in Nepal is not long. Nepal National Education Planning Commission (NNEPC) Report 1955 recommended scholarship for girls. In 1971, scholarship for girls was introduced with the launching of the Equal Access for Women Education Project. Similarly, Seti Project (1980), Primary Education Project (1984/85), Basic Education Primary Project (BPEP-I 1992/93–1997/98), BPEP II (1998/99–2003/04), Secondary Education Development Project (1992–2000), Education For All (2004–09), Tenth Plan (2002-2007), Three Year Interim Plan (2007/08 to 2009/10), Interim Constitution (2007), Thirteen plan, School Sector Reform Plan (2009-2015), Constitution of Nepal 2015, and School Sector Development Program (2016-2023) contain provisions for ensuring gender equality

in education. Although these policies and plans were formed by the Government of Nepal, still a large number of girl children are out of school in rural Madhesh. Recently, Government of Province 2 has introduced a policy of "Save the Girls and Educate Girls" to promote girl education.

Study method

Combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches has been in practice in many area of gender and education research worldwide. However, this study adopted qualitative approach. Parents' views on girl education can also be studied with quantitative approaches. Conversely, it is more difficult to explore attitude, beliefs, mindset, and perception of parents on girl education through quantitative approach. In this regard, this study adopted a qualitative approach where parents' perception on their daughters' education was studied via naturalistic and subjective inquiry in a real-world setting inductively through interactions more closely (Limb & Dwyer, 2001). For this, six knowledgeable research participants (whose daughters were below age 16) were purposively selected from rural Madhesh. In-depth interview was carried out for information collection. Before each interview, rapport was built and permission taken to record the conversation. In-depth interview was taken in natural setting via the prolonged interactive engagement in local language by avoiding jargon and metaphoric words at the participants' place. An enabling and convenient environment was created during each interview to offer ample space for expressing and sharing their insights on girl education freely without any hesitation. The same research questions were asked with every participant with extensive follow up interview for clarity of understanding. The interviews were an informal dialogue between research participants and me. During the interview, their social setting was accepted and acknowledged. In order to make sense from data, transcription was done at earliest. After this, information was coded for development of themes and subthemes and finally analysis was done.

Household chores and girls' education

Due to the effect of government policy and program targeted for girls, Nepal has seen a vast increase in the number of school attending girl children over the last decade. However, enrolment of girls is still less than boys. This scenario is worse in the case of rural Madheshi girls. There are various reasons which keep rural Madheshi girls out of school. Household chores are barrier to schooling for girls. Traditionally, girls are expected to do more chores at home than boys (Bista, 2004). It is a serious issue for girls' education in rural Madhesh. Girls are raised up to perform women roles such as child care and domestic responsibilities. Because of household chores, many rural Madheshi girls are unable to attend school. They have compulsion and obligation to contribute to household chores rather than go to school. Parents expect their daughter to do household chores and give low priority in education. Most of girls assist in household chores and shoulder the responsibility of looking after younger siblings. Girls with more preschool-age siblings need to manage more chores and thus spend

less time in school. As per the research of Dreze and Kingdon (1999), it has been found that there is a negative impact on female education in families where the females are deputed to look after their siblings. Number of young siblings acts as a barrier for their education because of an increased load of household assigned to girl child in the household (Lewis & Lockheed, 2006). As per Edmonds (2006), in Nepal the presence of younger siblings (brothers or sisters) is correlated with more domestic work for older sisters. Madheshi parents also have willingness to send their daughters to school, however, they are unable. This is because nobody else in the household assists them. Hence, household chores become a deterrent to girls' schooling in rural Madhesh. Some parents are conscious about their daughter's education. Conscious parents divide the household chores among their daughters allowing a few of them to go to school.

Income of family and girls' education

The Government of Nepal has declared free and compulsory primary education. However, many Madheshi families keep their children out of school because of the high cost of education. Especially girls from lower-income families are deprived of formal education due to the same reason. As per Groot (2007), education-related costs compel families to choose which child should go to school and which should not. In case of economic constraints, most of the rural Madheshi parents prefer to send their sons to school instead of daughters. Living in poverty and low income is hindering the education of the female children in Madhesh. Although, primary education is free in Government schools in rural Madhesh, there are additional costs related to uniform, books, stationeries and so on. The expenses may be too much beyond the affordability of a low-income family. Opportunity cost of educating girls is high in rural Madhesh. Because of financial limitation in family, a large number of Madheshi girls are deprived of their right to education every year.

Marriage and girls' education

The Constitution of Nepal 2015 has guaranteed education as a fundamental right. However, due to the tradition and practice of early marriage in rural Madhesh, many girls are deprived of the right to education. Socio-cultural factors promote parents to marry their daughters at an early age which creates an obstacle for girls' education. The practice of early marriage and the traditional view of girls as someone else's property prevent families from valuing girls' education (Bista, 2004). The cultural practice among families to arrange the early marriage for daughters negatively impacts their education. In general, many rural Madheshi girls do not complete school education. Once girls become 14-16 years of age, they get married and have to go to the groom's house. It would be nice if girls would complete higher education but usually, they get married after class 9 or 10. Early marriage and dowry is a longstanding problem. Dowry encourages girls' parents to arrange marriage at an early age. Parents of more educated girls search for well -educated boys. As a result, parents have to pay a large sum in dowry. Hence, rural Madheshi parents feel difficulty to educate girl children up to a higher level. The essential of paying a dowry creates a burden for parents which negatively influences

on their education. The practice of early marriage and dowry often leads to the drop out from formal education. Girls have no option to refuse their early marriage. Gradually, the scenario of rural Madhesh is changing. Educated boys would like to marry with an educated girl which is creating pressure to parents for educating their daughters.

Discrimination and girls' education

Discriminatory values and norms against women and girls are deeply rooted in Nepali society (Bista, 2004) and Madheshi society is not an exception. Madheshi society is patriarchal in nature. In general, the future of a rural Madheshi girl is defined by her role as mother, housewife and daughter-in-law. Madheshi parents are giving more value to sons' education and sending them to private schools whereas daughters are being sent to public schools with limited facilities and even taken out of school in case of financial constraint. Indeed, education is important for both boys and girls. However, rural Madheshi parents make a distinction between boys and girls. Some parents do not believe that education is relevant to girls. Even when daughter wants to go to school, parents are not interested to send her. In general, some rural Madheshi parents believe educating daughter is a waste because after marriage she has to go to her husband's house. Parents believe spending on sons is worthy and consider it as long term investment while spending on daughters yields no financial benefit. Despite this, many Madheshi parents have realized that educating a girl is key to girl's quality of life. In recent year, parents have started to send their daughters to school but the trend is limited among few families.

Discussion and reflection

Madheshi society is patriarchal in nature which favors males' education than females. Favoring boys over girls has negative consequences on female education. Decision-making about girls' education is mostly controlled by a male household head within the family. In general, parents discriminate between girls and boys. In rural Madhesh, culturally, girls need to perform domestic chores and responsibilities while boys can focus on their studies. Hence, inequality in Madheshi education is the product of age-old cultural traditions. Madheshi parents have a stock of cultural capital by which cultural codes and practices are transmitted to their children through the process of family and society socialization. Parents seek to transmit the cultural capital to the children through the division of work. Parental cultural capital influences early (DiMaggio, 1982) and later educational attainment of education (DiMaggio & Mohr, 1985). Inequalities in girl education in rural Madhesh are reproduced via family based endowment. Madheshi parents have preoccupied subjective world of thoughts and activities regarding female education exacerbating inequalities in girl education. Different forces such as tradition, cultural, psychological, emotional attachment which comes in interaction with habits breed inequalities. Parents endow their girl children with physical, human, social, and especially cultural capital the transmission of which creates inequalities in girl education. Family-based reproductive process which favors males and exclude female has direct bearing on access to education. Parents' action promotes the cultural capital by rewarding boy students who

possesses such capital and penalizing girl students who do not. Thus, family and parents are a central agent of exclusion and reproduction.

Socio-cultural values of rural Madheshi parents are not favorable for girls to pursue to the same level as boys. Discriminatory traditional cultural belief and practices against female are deeply rooted in rural Madhesh. This traditional cultural beliefs and practices have created a vicious cycle of illiteracy. Culturally, the value of a girl education in the view of parents is less than boys. Parents' demand for the education of their daughters is low, reflecting both cultural norms and females work in and around the home (Atayi, 2008). Traditionally and culturally, girls have duty to predominantly take care of household chores which is a product of cultural codes about gender roles. Cultural codes profoundly influence decision about sending a girl to school. Traditional, socio-cultural factors posit a diminishing return to education for girls. Early marriage of young girls, sibling care and other household chores challenge the necessity for girls to attain education as boys. Madheshi girls want to at least complete higher secondary education given an opportunity. The self-perception of girl child is often shaped by traditional cultural role in Nepali society, which involves household duties; and restricted mobility (Acharya, 2007), and Madheshi girls are not exceptional from this. Inequality in girl education is carried out not with force but through consent and even active participation of Madheshi girl's children against whom violence is being done. Inequality in education is taking place against Madheshi girls who are actually deprived. Prevalent barriers to girls' education in rural Madhesh are the deep-rooted tradition and culture. Socio-cultural factors are largely affecting girls' education. Lack of a supportive environment for girl's education is prevalent.

Conclusion

Educating girls is a key for balanced socio-economic development as well as empowerment. The goal of prosperous Nepal and happy Nepali can only be attained through educating girls and reducing gender disparities in education. Gender disparity in education is the most troubling issues affecting girl's life in rural Madhesh. Parents' attitude and belief is a critical factor determining the education of girls in rural Madhesh. Parents' view is on girls' education is less supportive than boys. Girls from poor and disadvantaged families are mostly deprived of education. Parents pay more attention to marry their daughters as early as possible rather than think about their completion of compulsory education. Traditional cultural norms and values create inequality in girl's education in rural Madhesh. This inequality is a product of cultural reproduction. Parents reproduce and transmit cultural codes to their children where boys are rewarded by higher quality education and girls are excluded. In spite of this, many Madheshi parents have realized that education is equally important for girls in recent year. The right of education of girls shouldn't be infringed at any cost. Madheshi girls must be educated for prosperity of Madhesh. Development of Madhesh can only be possible after educating the girls. Hence, concerned stakeholders must pay attention for educating girls.

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