

# Policy Brief

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Adolescent boys in Nepal © NISER

## A tale of contradictions: understanding the impact of social norms on Nepali men and boys

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### Introduction

Adolescence has powerful impacts on young people's capabilities, partly because of the physical transformations wrought by puberty and partly because children's place in their family and broader community shifts as they approach adulthood (Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) consortium, 2019). In countries where cultural beliefs dictate that female sexuality needs to be controlled by men, adolescence is an even more difficult life stage, as the physical changes brought about by puberty invite stigma and censorship, and social norms become more stringent (Samuels et al., 2017). This has particularly strong impacts on women and girls in patriarchal societies where female sexuality is a taboo and where control over female sexuality is a norm. In such societies, girls start losing any autonomy they may have enjoyed as younger children as soon as puberty begins; they often experience psychosocial violence and bear the brunt of harmful gender norms and discrimination in educational and job opportunities, thus falling behind their male peers in personal development throughout their lives (GAGE consortium, 2019).

However, patriarchy also has another face, which remains largely unseen: the harmful impact of social norms on men and boys themselves – particularly expectations around what responsibility males, as fathers and brothers, should take for women in their families. In Nepal, research by GAGE over recent years finds that fathers and brothers, who are considered 'guardians' of women and girls, have social obligations to protect and provide for their sisters and daughters but also make sure women in the family adhere to traditional social norms. Because men in the family are seen as guardians of women, they are expected to take decisions for their female relatives. In such situations, the distinction between protection and control is often blurred. In their role as 'guardians', men and boys also face stringent social norms, which means their lives are often no less difficult.

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## Box 1: Rupantaran programme

Rupantaran's life skills curriculum model is a comprehensive training package for children and adolescents, developed by UNICEF and the government of Nepal, taken up by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and also embedded in government programming. World Vision's Rupantaran programme is an ongoing programme. The first batch started in 2017, and has been implemented in Biratnagar (Morang district). The programme aims to develop adolescents' skills and help them become agents for change in their families and communities, while empowering them to realise their rights. Rupantaran teaches children to take more responsible and accountable life decisions and actions, equipping them with skills that benefit not just their own lives but those of their families and communities.

The Rupantaran package consists of 15 modules, with one book for each module. The course is expected to be completed in a year. The course covers topics around children's rights; life skills; health and hygiene; sexual and reproductive health; financial skills; savings; and social skills such as leadership, decision-making, interpersonal communication, goal-setting, managing feelings, self-esteem, active listening, team building, group facilitation, problem-solving, critical thinking, and creative thinking. It uses peer-to-peer teaching methods: for each adolescent group, an adolescent boy and girl from among the group are selected as peer leaders, and undergo training to be able to teach their peers. They are supported during their training by experienced course facilitators. The full curriculum takes 7–10 months to complete. The core (mandatory) components of the life skills model are as follows:

- Selecting the vulnerable cluster/adolescents for peer education.
- Training the peer educators on the Rupantaran model.
- Providing 25–32 sessions on life skills through peer education to the selected adolescents at weekends/holidays.
- Using standard session plans to deliver the 15 modules and curriculum regularly during the year to selected adolescents.
- Empowering adolescents to take better decisions to improve their life outcomes and avoid harms such as child marriage, drug abuse, child labour and child abuse.

Engagement of men and boys is now recognised as important for changing harmful norms that affect women and girls. However, a GAGE review of programmes for men and boys in low- and middle-income countries (Marcus et al., 2018) shows that programmes largely work with men and boys as stakeholder groups in the context of women's (and girls') empowerment programmes. As such, the modules in the programmes are largely on consent in sexual relationships, positive masculinities, gender-based violence and health education (ibid), which highlight men's responsibilities vis-à-vis women and girls. There is less attention paid to the impact of social norms on men and boys themselves in general, and in particular how they experience the guardianship of women.

In order to end harmful practices such as early marriage, the dowry system and dropout of girls from education, we need to understand the context in which men as household heads take decisions relating to these subjects.

Providing the country-specific context to GAGE's global synthesis of how to work effectively with adolescent boys in LMICs to promote gender-equitable masculinities, this policy brief discusses some rarely explored issues. It addresses the complexities, contradictions and deprivations in the lives of men and boys, highlighting how fathers and brothers can

also experience harmful norms in the family, community and school, in relation to their adolescent daughters/sisters/peers.

This brief is based on qualitative data collected between 2018 and 2019 as part of a baseline study of World Vision's Rupantaran programme, a peer-to-peer life skills education initiative in Biratnagar Nepal (see Box 1).

## Study site

Working closely with the World Vision team, researchers selected two study sites (one urban, one rural): Biratnagar metropolitan city (urban); and Gramthan rural municipality (rural).<sup>2</sup>

Biratnagar is one of Nepal's biggest industrial districts and a gateway for exports and imports. It is regarded as a place of educated and politically aware citizens. People from Biratnagar travelled as far as Beneras of India to be educated at a time when there were no formal schools in Nepal and when there was little emphasis in society on the importance of education. It was where protests for democracy started and many of the country's famous political leaders come from Biratnagar. It is also home to other important political movements of the country (such as the democratic movement to change Nepal into a multi-

<sup>2</sup> Upon completion of the baseline, World Vision (which has been implementing livelihoods programmes for a number of years with vulnerable communities in Biratnagar) will implement Rupantaran, targeting adolescent girls and boys in the poorest pockets of the area.

party country, overthrowing 104 years of the autocratic 'Rana regime', among others).

The Rupantaran programme was run in areas of the city where people are largely uneducated, living on public land, are employed in precarious daily wage labour and where social problems such as alcoholism are rife. Since the programme deliberately targeted the most vulnerable social groups in both urban and rural sites, there was not much difference between the livelihood status of people of rural and urban sites selected for the study. Most programme beneficiaries were from the so-called 'low-caste' groups – 'Terai Dalits' from the plain areas such as Rishideves, Sarbarias and Sardars. Among these communities, child marriage and school dropout is high. Given the programme's focus on particular ethnic groups and GAGE's own research consequently focusing on those same groups, the results may not be generalisable to other population groups across the country.

## Research methodology

The research used qualitative methods; data was collected from 222 participants using participatory tools such as body mapping, community timelines and mapping of social support networks. Data collection involved 40 nodal adolescents (who, along with their parents and siblings, will act as a cohort and will be re-interviewed after the intervention); in-depth interviews (IDIs) with 9 fathers, 11 mothers and 8 siblings; 4 community sessions; focus group discussions (FGDs) with 4 groups of grandfathers, 4 groups of grandmothers, and 4 groups of parents (2 fathers' groups, 2 mothers' groups); 2 community mappings and 2 body mappings with male and female adolescent groups; and 10 key informant interviews (KIIs). Of the 40 nodal adolescents, 20 will participate in the programme, while the other 20 will act as a control group (i.e. they are girls and boys who face similar living conditions but will not be enrolled in the programme). Of the total participants, 101 are male.

## Context

The findings explore the complexities and contradictions of social norms for fathers and brothers emerging from the baseline study. The first section is about the contradiction inherent in Biratnagar city; how Biratnagar, which is famous for being one of the most progressive and affluent cities of Nepal, has areas where people are very poor and follow harmful traditional norms. The second section describes how harmful social norms around masculinity affect men and boys and why they feel compelled to make decisions that are harmful for women and girls. Since this brief focuses on fathers and sons, we do not discuss in detail the perspectives

and roles of women as mothers or women's position in household decision-making.

## Pockets of poverty and marginalisation amid affluence

Biratnagar, the district headquarters of Morang and the capital of Province 2, is the fifth biggest city in Nepal and is among the top 10 districts (out of 77) in terms of the human development index (HDI). Nepal's industrial capital, Biratnagar's border with India was the largest export gateway in 2017/18, accounting for almost one-third (30.58%) of the country's total exports (Government of Nepal, Department of Customs, 2018).

The baseline study found pockets of extreme poverty and marginalisation within this apparently affluent area. People, particularly those from the Madhesi ethnic group, experience poverty and illiteracy, and are subject to harmful beliefs and practices. Norms for girls and young married women are particularly restrictive: there are heavy limitations on girls' and women's mobility and social interactions; son bias remains prevalent; the dowry system persists despite being illegal; and discrimination by parents between sons and daughters (in terms of investment in education, for instance) is widespread. As Biratnagar appears to be a relatively well-developed district of Nepal, such pockets of poverty and marginalisation remain largely ignored by interventions and programmes, whether implemented by the central government or NGOs. Similarly, while girls from other ethnic groups in Biratnagar have high educational and career goals (see, for example, Calder et al., 2017), girls in these pockets of poverty and marginalisation have either not been to school or have dropped out of primary grades due to the need to take care of the household and get married early.

## Growing aspirations for education but insufficient higher education

There has been a surge in the aspirations of parents (and grandparents) to invest in children's education, even in the poor pockets of Biratnagar. For the first time, all girls have been enrolled in school – unlike their mothers' generation, when girls who went to school were largely stigmatised (people thought girls would have love affairs and sexual relationships with boys if they went to school). We even found that children (boys and girls) aged 3 and 4 years are going to early childhood development (ECD) classes to prepare them for primary school. They are the first in their community to attend ECD classes and the first to carry their books in bags (instead of in their hands like their elder siblings), to take tiffin (a lunch snack) to school, and to wear shoes (instead of flip-flops) to school. Their older siblings did not benefit from ECD classes (as these were not available then), and went to



school much later (around 6 or 7 years old).

However, despite these positive changes, we also found gaps and contradictions. Spending on education for children up to grade 10 (roughly 16 years of age) was still perceived as a large burden by parents due to poverty. Most adolescent girls and boys go to government schools where education is free but where quality can be variable. Parents expect that (especially for boys) completing grade 10 will lead to a white-collar job in government offices or banks, with the result that their sons will quickly start giving back to the family. However, in reality, jobs are not readily available and it takes more years of higher education for someone to obtain a good white-collar job. As such, parents are likely to become disillusioned with the potential returns that education can offer – even for boys, let alone girls.

## Findings

### **Dilemmas faced by men/fathers: marry daughters early or keep them in school?**

Given GAGE's previous studies in similar areas, as well as findings from the secondary literature, we had expected that fathers would be marrying off their daughters at a young

age rather than investing in their education because of the discriminatory attitudes towards investing in daughters. The higher the girl's level of education, the better the groom they would have to find, and the better the groom, the more dowry they would need to pay. Moreover, we expected that they take the decisions because they fear running the risk of their daughter/sister eloping or worse (in society's eyes) – of having sexual relationships before marriage and tarnishing the family name.

In Biratnagar, marriage arranged by guardians is the norm and boys and girls choosing their own life partner is stigmatised. Fathers or brothers are expected to find grooms for girls. If they fail to do so in time, they face social stigma for keeping their daughter/sister at home for too long and not being able to fulfil their duty of finding a suitable husband. This prompts them to start looking for grooms for daughters early on. Boys as brothers are regarded as guardians of their sisters (along with the father) if the father is too old, once the boy is married or starts to earn, if the father does not earn enough, or is not around (e.g. because he has migrated). Boys as sons also take on this responsibility, either alone or shared with the father, and thus may also encounter the same social pressures and stigma.

However, our interviews show that contrary to how they are portrayed and framed – for example, in government and NGO campaigns and literature (see Human Rights Watch, 2016; UNFPA and UNICEF, 2017), which also framed our perceptions of them – fathers do not necessarily want to marry their daughters off early. We found that fathers are often forced into choosing this option for daughters because of poverty and a lack of resources. They do not have enough money to both educate their daughters and pay for their dowries, which rise as girls become more educated.

For girls, being unmarried is seen as a big failure in life in the study sites; people see a girl as a failure if she is not married by the age of 20–21. Being uneducated or not having a job, on the other hand, is not seen as abnormal for girls. They are expected to look after the family and so they are not criticised for not having a job or dropping out of education. We find that for fathers, there is no certainty that late marriage/continuation of education for daughters can provide security for their daughter. Since people prefer young brides, keeping girls in high school where they might be 19–21 years old already risks their chances of getting a husband in the future. This forces fathers to choose early marriage (e.g. at the age of 16 or 17) over keeping them in school, as having daughters married off and under the care and responsibility of a husband is perceived to offer her a safer and more certain future.

Given the levels of poverty and deprivation in these areas of Biratnagar, fathers and brothers also often sacrifice their own freedoms, working hard and often in dire conditions to fulfil what they consider their first responsibility as guardians – to provide for their families, doing their best for their daughters or sisters. They have few options. As well as fearing that failure to marry off their daughter/sister means an uncertain future for the girl, our interviews (with fathers and mothers alike) show that, for parents, another big fear of having an unmarried daughter is that she will face scrutiny and harassment from the community, and will have to remain under the care of her brother and his wife (her sister-in-law) after the death of her parents. The girl's parents fear that their unmarried daughter would not be treated well, both by the community and by her brother's in-laws. As the father of one adolescent girl explained:

*If our daughters do not get married in time, the community will look down upon them. People will gossip and backbite. Also, when we are alive, we will look after them, but after our death, they will have to live under the mercy of brothers and their wives. It will be a difficult life.*

This view was expressed by both fathers and mothers during our interviews and discussions. Ancestral property

does not pass to daughters in this community, and girls will have no assets for financial support in old age. In such cases, a girl's brother and his wife might not take care of her, particularly when she grows old and is more likely to need care.

Even if marrying off their daughters/sisters means they have to give a dowry often far beyond their means, fathers and brothers are still choosing to marry girls rather than invest in their education and thus give them a means to earn money. For fathers and brothers, a dowry is a way to ensure that their daughters/sisters are protected in their in-laws' house after marriage, when they are beyond the immediate protection of their natal family. A dowry is also given so that girls will not face violence (which is often severe and sometimes results in death) at the hands of her in-laws. Hence, marriage as soon as one has found a suitable groom (someone willing to take a smaller dowry, has a job and is from a good family) becomes more important than education and employment for daughters/sisters.

Early marriage has a related logic: in-laws are likely agree to a smaller dowry, as young girls are more highly desired as brides than older ones. Although age at marriage varies depending on ethnic group and community, girls at our fieldwork sites usually married between the ages of 14 and 18, with parents starting to worry that they were too old after that age. When a girl gets older, it is very likely that she will not get a groom. So, given the circumstances of high levels of poverty and low levels of literacy, fathers are deciding to marry their daughters off early as they think that is the best option for their daughters' future.

### **Pressure to control girls to keep family name and honour**

As guardians of the family, men (fathers and brothers) are expected to implement social sanctions within the family. As girls reach puberty, their fathers and brothers also start to face relentless judgement in relation to their adolescent daughter's (or sister's) demeanour in the community. Men's honour in such communities remains intact only if females in their family strictly abide by expected norms. Otherwise,

**► No. I will not let my sister work in places outside home, like me. How can we allow them to go for work? ... We are earning and we will bear the household expenses.**

(The brother of an adolescent girl in Gramthan rural municipality)

## Box 2: Running away from home

Shrawan, aged 19, dropped out of school in grade 6 at the age of 13 to run away from home and take up a job so he could help his father, who was struggling to provide for the family. He has three sisters, one of whom will soon reach marriageable age. One day, at 5am, without informing anyone, he joined a local contractor who was taking workers to India for road construction. He called his mother only a week after he arrived in Delhi. He remembers both he and the mother crying each time he made a phone call. He came back after a year but despite his mother's wishes (not to go), he ran away again – this time to work in a factory in another Indian state, Punjab, with the help of an Indian friend he met during his first trip. Each time, he saves his earnings and sends them to his mother.

Since then, coming home and running away has become a routine for him. Even though he is only 19 he has done many different kinds of work, in more than five different places in India. He is now worried about his ageing parents as there is no one to take care of them in his absence. This is what has kept him in the village for more than 2 months this time. So, when we asked him if he would run away to India again, he says he has now decided to continue his work with the same contractor but in Nepal. If he finds someone to look after his parents, he will go for a few years to Qatar where his uncles are and where he hopes to earn more so that he can save and settle in Nepal.

they are ostracised and criticised by the community for not being 'man' enough to control the women and girls in their families (Ghimire and Samuels, 2017). Hence, as social norms start becoming more rigid for girls, fathers and brothers also start being scrutinised for how well they are fulfilling their masculine roles. This challenge facing fathers came up often during interviews and group discussions with parents and grandparents. However, there is a dearth of evidence on how Nepali men, as fathers and brothers, experience social norms in relation to their adolescent daughters/sisters, so this is an area that needs to be explored further.

### Boys dropping out of school – no other choice than to support the family

Though significant attention has been paid to girls dropping out of school in the South Asia region, the rate of dropout among boys is often ignored and can, in fact, be much higher than for girls. According to a UNICEF South Asia report (Leotes Lugo and Sarkar, 2015), if the current trend in the region continues, more boys of primary school age will be out of school than girls in the next few years. This trend is also evident in Nepal: nationally, the dropout rate for girls is higher than boys in grade 1, but lower in subsequent grades (except for grade 8). The dropout rate for boys is 4.3% (against 4.1% for girls) at primary level, and 5.6% (against 5% for girls) at lower secondary level. Similarly, fewer boys enrol in secondary education than girls: girls' net secondary enrolment rate was 62%, versus 58% for boys. Similarly, while girls aged 15–24 are significantly less likely to be literate than their male peers (80% versus 90%), recent progress towards parity means that girls in Nepal are now significantly more likely to complete lower secondary school than boys – 86% versus 79% respectively (ibid.).

This national trend was reflected in our local-level fieldwork in Biratnagar: contrary to our expectations, boys

were also dropping out of primary and secondary education or were missing classes. We found several factors that combine to push boys out of school.

First, as discussed earlier, social norms around responsibility for financial support mean that parents start expecting sons to earn for the family (including for dowries for any sisters) relatively early on, already when they enter into late adolescence. We have found cases where boys who are just two years older than their sisters have to start earning so that they can help their fathers earn enough money for their dowries. While parents whose resources are scarce might choose not to invest in girls' education and instead prefer to save for the dowry, they would not expect girls to contribute to the household income or their own dowry. However, if the father is old or unable to earn a good income, or if there are many sisters of marriageable age, there is even more pressure on boys to help the father earn.

Boys also reported feeling that they should be able to pay back the investment their parents made in their education and, as such, felt that it was better to start earning early. This pressure came from the family but also from the boys themselves. It was common to hear older adolescent boys who were only a few years older than their sisters say they would earn to keep the family afloat but would not want their sisters to help them earn money. While this may appear to be a controlling behaviour at first glance, this message shows the deeply entrenched sense of responsibility that boys and men bear in relation to the financial burden of the household. As the brother of one adolescent girl in Gramthan rural municipality explained:

*No. I will not let my sister work in places outside home, like me. How can we allow them to go for work? I will not allow her to go to Biratnagar for work. We are earning and we will bear the household expenses. We will not allow them to work out of the village.*

We found cases where this sense of duty was so strongly engrained that boys do not even keep pocket money from their earnings – they first give all their money to the mother for household expenses and then ask her for some pocket money.

Second, during our interviews with parents and grandparents, we often heard that after grade 10 they expect that their adolescent sons will get a white-collar job. Parents also often shared that they cannot send children for higher education or to a quality school due to poverty, and that what they already spend is a huge burden for them. This means that boys constantly hear these expectations and are aware that their parents and grandparents are investing scarce resources in their education, with the hope that they can find a job in a bank or government office. People shared that only rich parents are able to afford higher/quality education, and the boys we interviewed were aware that their parents could not afford that. After going to school and completing lower secondary education, boys have better exposure to and knowledge of the outside world; yet, unlike their parents, they understand that their level (and quality) of education will not be sufficient to get the kind of job their parents expect them to. For this reason, boys are more inclined to drop out of school and start earning for the family.

We know from studies of human behaviour that 'perceptions about the future range considerably depending upon one's age, life experience, and belief systems and have enormous implications for how people think about their lives and make choices in the present' (Leaning and Arie, 2000). Our fieldwork suggests that mid-adolescent and older adolescent boys make decisions about their future in relation to the conditions they see in the following male reference groups: those men and boys who have higher/quality education and are doing well in white-collar jobs; men who are struggling in daily wage labour (which is often the case of their illiterate or barely literate fathers); and men who migrate to the Gulf states and Malaysia (which is often the option taken by uncles and elder brothers who left school early). These perceptions in turn combine with the obvious unpredictability that the future brings: for example, what will happen if their father becomes ill or dies, or he is not able to earn, or if there is a crop failure? Who will pay for the dowries for their sisters? They know that their parents cannot afford quality secondary education, but they would like to do better than their fathers did to help the family economically. As such, they seek to displace the uncertainties of their situation with whatever is within their control so that they will have predictable consequences.

***The teachers do not understand. They will beat me up if my parents do not pay my fees on time. So, I don't like to go to school if my fees are not paid.***

(A 14-year-old boy from Biratnagar)

Social scientists who study human behaviour have an explanation for this decision. Scientists such as Birdsall (1994), Leaning and Arie (2000), find that when a person places no hope in the distant future, she or he compromises on investment for building capacity that may be gainful in the future and makes decisions that makes sense in the present. They call this 'foreshortened planning horizon' (Birdsall, 1994). Investing the scarce family resources in education, which does not hold much promise, in this context seems wasteful and naive. In doing so, fathers (and also with support from mothers) dismiss the value of education and investment in education for the future, applying 'a high discount rate' (Kaplan and Norton, 1992, cited in Leaning and Arie, 2000) – that is, they dismiss the importance of higher education because their life needs to start making sense in the immediate present rather than in a distant future. They need to be able to see immediate improvements resulting from their decisions. Hence, they find migration to be the most suitable option – a well-trodden path where they can also get support from established social networks of their migrant brothers and uncles. Moreover, there are small-scale contractors in the village who readily hire boys for construction and other work in other districts and across the border in India. This is another reason why boys drop out of school (see Box 2).

### **Boys are more likely to face physical and emotional violence in school than girls**

From our previous studies in similar contexts as well as the secondary literature (International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), 2014), we expected that boys would face harassment and violence in schools, but to a lesser extent than girls.

However, we found that on many occasions, both younger and older adolescent boys face more violence than girls in schools. Evidence from our study sites shows that corporal punishment – although illegal – still exists in schools and can be so severe for boys that they stay away from school to avoid it. They encounter violence when (for instance) they have not done their assignments, when teachers feel they are not paying attention in class,

when they do not understand lessons and for things that are beyond their control such as when their parents are unable to pay school fees, buy clothes, books and other educational materials. Teachers were reported to use their hands, sticks and even iron rods to beat male students, as one 13-year-old boy from Biratnagar explained:

*No, I cannot solve my worry of teachers beating me up in school. The teachers will always beat us for one reason or the other. They even use iron sticks for beating us.*

A 14-year-old boy also explained what happens if school fees have not been paid:

*I told my mother to pay my fees, otherwise I will not be allowed to sit my exams. She said that she does not have even a single rupee and asked me to go to school and that she will pay fees tomorrow. But I did not trust her and I did not go to school. I cannot tell my teacher that my mother will pay my fees tomorrow. The teachers do not understand. They will beat me up if my parents do not pay my fees on time. So, I don't like to go to school if my fees are not paid.*

For older adolescent boys, emotional violence in school is common and severe. Those in grades 9 and 10 reported being subject to emotional abuse from male teachers, explaining that they discriminate against boys, behave rudely or disrespectfully towards them, make jokes about them and humiliate them in class for no apparent reason. They are of the opinion that male teachers see them as rivals, which is why they humiliate them in front of girls. They also feel that such teachers favour girls and try to win their attention. The boys do not complain about it because they fear repercussions and worry that teachers might seek revenge against them at any time. Moreover, it is difficult to show concrete evidence of such abuse to prove what has happened and who was responsible. Finally, boys also rarely complain because of prevailing gender norms that dictate that 'men/boys should not complain about small things but should take care of it themselves'. For all these reasons boys fear social stigma and fear that they will not be believed but will instead be blamed, bringing more shame upon them for complaining. Feeling frustrated with this situation, some boys who are enrolled in school end up not attending class and instead roam by the riverside during the day and go home when school time is over. This frustration contributes to their loss of interest in education and early dropout to find work.

**I dislike when older boys beat me in school. However, I do not tell my parents about it. I told my teacher but he shouted at me instead.**

(An adolescent boy in Gramthan rural municipality)

Getting bullied by seniors at school was reported to be a common experience for young adolescent boys, something that girls typically do not face. When young male adolescents face bullying, it is often seen as their fault (parents/teachers believe they might have misbehaved with the older boys or not respected them) and their complaints are often dismissed by the school administration and teachers. They appear not to tell their parents about bullying, believing that parents would not be able to do anything to help or for fear of being accused of behaving badly. As one adolescent boy in Gramthan rural municipality explained:

*I dislike when older boys beat me in school. However, I do not tell my parents about it. I told my teacher but he shouted at me instead saying I probably was the one to go and fight with them. I was wounded and had to go to the doctor for medicine. I don't know why they beat us.*

### **Adolescent boys can sometimes be poorer than girls because of lack of assets/endowments**

The study in Biratnagar finds that there is a custom of grandparents giving gifts such as a pet goat or chicken, or jewellery to girls. These are given at a much younger age and are not part of their dowries. They can rear the animals and breed more, which also allows them to make small earnings from those animals. They further invest this money in buying more chickens and goats. They do not have to give the money from these assets to their parents. When parents are unable to invest in their daughters' education or other needs, girls were found to sell these animals to meet their own needs. As there is a general culture of not using a daughter's money for household expenses, girls do not necessarily have to contribute to these and thus are able to have small savings. Girls also do seasonal work in nearby fields with their mothers (mostly planting rice); they are not expected to give their earnings from this work to the parents. However, boys do not get such gifts, and if they earn from seasonal labour while studying, they are expected to contribute this money to the household. While





this gender difference might not be a disadvantage when families can fulfil their children's basic needs, in cases where they cannot, boys do not have any other personal assets or savings to turn to, unless their parents give them something or until they inherit the parental property, which girls cannot. However, since most households in the study sites were largely struggling to meet their daily needs, parents were rarely able to give their sons anything for investment.

## Conclusions

Focusing on adolescents is important since they make up a quarter of the population of Nepal and because adolescence is a critical window of opportunity for intervention if Nepal is to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

This brief has argued that it is important to understand the underlying drivers of men's decision to marry off their girls as children, if this harmful practice is to be comprehensively tackled. Law enforcement works to reduce the likelihood that fathers will take actions such as arranging child marriages and dowries but, as our research finds, this is not a long-lasting solution. Several of our key informants from the government and security forces who are in law enforcement positions explain that

families are able to evade the law by, for example, taking their daughters to India for the marriage ceremony. We argue that in order to make lasting changes, we need to address the problems that men face as decision-makers and some of this is around addressing harmful norms that compel men to take such decisions.

Our findings caution that despite overall indicators of affluence, any area might have pockets of vulnerability and poverty, as well as populations whose lives are very different from those of the majority represented in general discourse. For adolescents specifically, such vulnerability and poverty form the context in which their lives are embedded, and thus have an important impact on how they make decisions – all of which affects their lives now and in the future.

The study also found that while parental aspirations for their children's education (boys and girls) are increasing, it has not resulted in any concrete changes in outcomes, including for boys. Parents expect quick returns from educational investment in boys – though not so much for girls. Yet this lack of investment is no less detrimental to boys than parents not investing in girls' higher education so that they can save for their dowries. Moreover, as national statistics show, girls are more likely overall to continue

education once they complete primary level but for boys, unrealistic expectations of an immediate return on investment have contributed to a continued high dropout rate. This is reflected in Biratnagar, where boys who are caught between the inability of parents to invest in higher-level and quality education, and parental expectations that they take white-collar jobs, discount the value of higher education and drop out to find work in order to save their parents from being disappointed but also out of a sense of financial responsibility towards the household, including working to contribute to their sisters' dowries.

Our findings reinforce the importance of understanding the meaning that actors attach to their actions, which may be contrary to what is generally understood and discussed by an outsider. While fathers and brothers are often portrayed negatively for their role in girls' early marriage and school dropout (Ghimire and Samuels, 2017), from their perspective they see no other option and are simply trying to do their best to fulfil their duties and obligations as brothers and fathers. From a father's point of view, a dowry (which is considered a harmful practice) is a way

to ensure his daughter's protection when she moves to the house of her in-laws and away from the jurisdiction of her natal family (father and brothers). Men endure a lot of hardship to ensure that they fulfil the responsibility that society has set out for them, which is to provide well for their families as husbands, sons and fathers. Young boys leave school to find work out of a sense of duty to provide for the family, especially if the father is less able to do so or needs a helping hand. Contrary to how men are often perceived and understood by the government and NGOs, we find that fathers/brothers are taking the best courses of action for their daughters based on their points of view.

Contrary to our expectations, we found that the school environment is no less challenging and unwelcoming for boys than it is for girls. Boys commonly face physical violence and emotional abuse in school, and feel that male teachers treat them worse than they do girls.

Finally, greater attention needs to be paid to poverty among adolescents. The fact that adolescent boys are expected to earn and contribute to their families while not having any of their own assets puts them in a doubly



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distressing situation. This leads them to take decisions that may seem beneficial or the best coping strategy in the short term but are likely to have detrimental impacts on their future well-being.

## Policy and programming implications

Social norm change is a long process and needs continuous work and requires different stakeholders to work together. This is already happening in Nepal to a reasonable extent: the government works with local civil society and with I/NGOs when it leads any social norms change project and I/NGOs likewise include government stakeholders when they lead a social norms change project. The following recommendations are for working jointly.

Our research findings point to the following policy and programming implications, all of which require joined up action across stakeholders:

### 1 Promote programmes that enable men to take the lead in tackling discriminatory gender norms that affect girls and women

While there are programmes targeting girls and women to help them tackle discriminatory norms, there are few programmes targeting boys and men. A multi-pronged approach is needed that not only supports girls' empowerment as individuals but also takes account of a girl's life as embedded in the family, and helps to strengthen the whole family system in order to empower girls. This means not only working with and for girls and women, but also working with and for boys and men. There should be separate programmes for boys and men where they can collectively share and reflect on social norms that are harmful to men and women, and thus find locally

appropriate ways to address such norms. Working with boys and men to help them address gendered norms that affect them negatively will also help them better understand how gendered norms affect their wives, sisters, mothers, daughters and daughters-in-law. This is perhaps the best way to help and encourage them to actively contribute to changing harmful gender norms for girls.

### 2 Harness existing resources to monitor and address harmful practices and help adolescents make better choices for the future

Use existing local resources such as mothers' groups, child protection committees and citizen awareness groups (among others) to fight harmful norms for both boys and girls and reduce the stigmatisation of adolescence. These groups are important reference groups at the local level. Hence, mobilising these groups to convey a message to the community about how harmful norms affect both boys and girls and using them to help local government bodies fight harmful norms for adolescents could be a low-cost and effective solution.

### 3 Invest in more evidence on gender norms and their effects on boys and fathers

There is a need to collect more evidence on how having adolescent daughters and sisters affects the lives of fathers and brothers. What are the positive and negative impacts and coping strategies, and how can actors address any detrimental impacts? There is also a need to collect more evidence on how social norms are experienced by men and boys as fathers and brothers and in their wider community, how they shape boys' life trajectories, and what can be done to minimise adverse effects.

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