

## BEING FEMALE: HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES

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### ABSTRACT

This research investigates the perspective of high school girls regarding their view on living as a female in Nepalese society. This issue is important as it unearths the updated views of the young female participants regarding their understanding of the female context in Nepal. Although there are studies involving women regarding various issues, there is not much research in the context of Nepal exploring the views of the school going females about their lives this research expects to contribute to the field of women's context from adolescent girls' point of view. Therefore, this study uses written responses from 16 high school girls on a given prompt regarding the lives of women to explore their understanding of women's status in Nepal. The responses from the participants were analysed from a gender perspective using the content analysis method. The findings revealed a rather pessimistic attitude of participants toward women's lives in Nepal due to ongoing social problems based on gender discrimination. It disclosed that girls are aware that they are discriminated in their family and society due to social attitude that gives more value to males. Moreover, cases of sexual harassment, women violence, dowry culture, and dehumanising menstrual rituals make their lives difficult and insecure.

**Keywords:** gender discrimination; sexual harassments; male preferences; dowry; menstrual seclusion

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Patriarchy is still a dominant social structure in Nepal that sidelines female motivations, aspirations, and priorities. Male preferences over females in opportunities such as education (Panthee 75) are some visible issues in Nepal. Not only that, even the constitutional rights are claimed to be discriminatory toward females in the past and still the law of passing citizenships underpins unequal female status as a citizen in the new constitution (Allison 74). Patriarchal social structure, social patterns, and laws altogether contribute to sustaining the traditional patriarchy and violence against women (Uprety 521). Although gender is inclusive with both male and female social statuses (Connell 4) due to the unequal status of women, gender studies in Nepal are highly focused on the issues of women. There are studies regarding women's status in Nepal from gender equality aspects, but most of these studies are generic. Therefore, this study attempts to contribute to gender understanding from the perspective of high school girls studying in a community school in Kathmandu.

### 2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

The research regarding gender focusing on female conditions in Nepal suggests that females are discriminated against males in families and society for opportunities such as education

(Panthee 75; Khanal 155), employment (Yamamoto et al. 1), and health (Pokhrel & Sauerborn 225) against males. Not only that, but they also claim women violence (Uprety 521; Yoshikawa et al. 4045), and female feticide (Lammichhane et al. 41). Morrow et al.'s (1127) recent study involving adolescent boys' and girls' view on child marriage suggests that both girls and boys had internalised social gender norms of females as a homemaker, parents as the final decision makers of their marriage, and family honour as a major force regulating girls' lives. Although there are extensive studies on the female status in Nepal claiming their secondary status, there are not many studies that explore the perspectives of females themselves regarding how they feel being a female in Nepalese society.

Among few such studies, a recent survey among 1093 adolescent girls regarding their aspirations in various life domains suggested that girls' aspirations were influenced by their family economic status (Madjdian et al. 15). Similarly, intergenerational studies on women by Mishra suggests that there has been changes in the menstrual practices (132), improvement in the access to education (59), changes in the trend of marriage and motherhood experiences (27). Although there is a gradual improvement in the various experiences of women compared to the past context, it is not enough because some recent studies still claim the prevalent of Chhaupadi (a practice of menstrual seclusion practiced in mid and far western Nepal) during their menstruation and childbirth resulting in mental and physical health hazards and safety hazards (Joshi 134; Amatya et al. 1). Unequal access to education (Khanal 155), child marriages (Bhandari 3; Pandey 244) and prenatal vulnerabilities (Paudel et al. 9).

These contexts suggest that there are many hindrances on the way of gender equality in Nepal. This article however attempts to explore the life of women through the eyes of high school girls in their written responses regarding how they feel living like a girl in Nepal. This study expects to contribute to the field of gender studies focusing on the adolescent girls' perception of women's lives in Nepal. It is anticipated that the responses from the participants will add value to see the gender context critically.

## 2.1 Theoretical perspective and methodology

This article conceptualises Connell's idea that gender patterns and ideas are different according to the social and cultural contexts (5). Connell also agrees that gender patterns and structures change with the change in lifestyles and thus may end someday in the future. Although women's status is relevantly lower in the overall world this status varies according to the context therefore women's status in a particular context cannot be generalised for all women. Even being a small country Nepalese women fall into various intersectionality and their status is influenced by their class, caste, age, marital status, education status, geographical regions, and their ethnicity. Thus, women in Nepal cannot be generalised. Also, due to advancement in political systems, education, and opportunities, women's access to opportunities their status in society is rapidly changing (Mishra 59; 132). Studies suggest that women are now involved in works that were traditionally under a male domain (Tamang et al. 23). Therefore, using Connell's idea of gender as a contextual phenomenon (5), this study explores the responses from the high school girls regarding their experiences and understanding of living as a female in Nepalese society. As Gender differs according to the various social contexts this study is limited to the opinions of high school girls who manage to come to the capital city of Kathmandu for their high school study and are studying in a community educational institution.

The findings from this study do not represent the girls who are still living life in remote villages where education comes after their everyday household chores, or these views do not represent the high-class city girls who study in private institutions paying high tuition fees.

### **3.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This research adopts a qualitative methodology and a content analysis (Stemler 1) method for data analysis. Content analysis is a preferable and popular method to analyse the verbal and written responses from the participants. In this research, written responses coming from the girls regarding their view on living as a female in Nepal were analysed. While doing so, first, all the responses were thoroughly read to find the female issues, description of the issues, examples, and opinions regarding those issues mentioned in their writings. The issues, descriptions and examples, and response regarding the issues were listed and grouped. The issues that repeated maximum time were noted.

A total of 36 students, 20 boys and 16 girls from Grade 11 and Grade 12 took part in a classroom assignment activity to write a response on a given prompt. They were asked to a response to the prompt that asked, "How do you find living as a female in your community (Nepal)? Give examples and details to support your claim."- to unearth the social gender expectations they face and their perspectives regarding it. The participants were asked to focus on their gender while writing responses. All the students were provided a loose sheet to write their opinions and allocated 45 minutes. Since this activity was done in an English language and literature class, assuming that language could be a barrier to expressing their opinions they were allowed using Nepali sentences and words. The participants were allowed to maintain their privacy in their expressions and were instructed to write only their gender and school year in the paper. The following day, the participants were appreciated for bringing up many important issues in their writings and their opinions were listed on board and discussed in detail. This paper only focuses on the reflections of 16 girls to bring forward what do adolescent high school girls feel about being a female in Nepal. The names used in the findings are pseudonyms respecting their anonymity.

### **4.0 FINDINGS**

#### **4.1 Awareness of son preferences in families**

Girls' written responses indicated that they were aware of the tendency of son preferences in the families. It seems that they have experienced and seen in their families and in societies that the arrival of sons is celebrated, however, the arrival of a daughter is not a matter of happiness. Their expressions that suggested their knowledge of this discrimination are inferred in these sentences.

"Family wants at least one son." (Suravi).

"Parents feel happy when a son is born, and they feel sad when a daughter is born." (Rupa),

"More respect is given to boys and if the first child is a son, parents feel happy." (Maya)

"If a daughter is born parents feel unlucky." (Rama)

“Domination starts from the womb of mother, or we can say before the birth of a girl.” (Nira)

These expressions suggest that they understand the male preferring tendency in their society. They are aware of discriminative attitudes toward sons and daughters in the family and the higher value given to sons than daughters. This finding aligns with the finding from other studies that claim son preferences in Nepalese society (Panthee 75; Paudel 7). Additionally, as they mention the discriminative treatment of girls in the family, they agree it should not be so. But it seems that they also know that they cannot do anything about it because it is not under their control as it is all about attitudes that prevail in society.

#### 4.2 Social pressure to have a son

It was noticed that even if the family is satisfied with their daughters, there is constant social pressure on the family to have a son. The girls are aware of this pressure from their relatives to their parents and the impacts of their pressure on their mental health. They contempt this social interference and emotional pressure on them and their parents by their relatives.

Nira writes elaboratively about this. “Talking about my family, my mom gave birth to two daughters only, my elder sister and me. We are always asked about our unborn brothers. When we say, we two sisters are the only siblings, they start to question us saying ‘how about elder and younger brothers?’”

Like Nira, Sita also personalises this situation and writes, “My relatives always complain about me being a single girl child in my family because my parents do not have a son. My relatives always want to see a son in my family. Relatives are always concerned about others’ lives, and they complain if the family is not as per their expectations. They backbite about others’ life. In my opinion, mainly in my society thinking should be changed. I hate the way they talk about others’ lives.”

This constant inquiry from the relatives reflects the social attitude that there should be at least one son in the family. Even if without personalisation Sandhya means similar thought in her remarks. Sita further writes, “People only think about the boys because they think boys are far better than girls. Such type of superstition is prevalent in our society.”

Regarding social pressure, Rupa says how parents happily invite neighbours when a son is born and how neighbours too appreciate the birth of a male child. And how their presence as daughters in the family is not sufficient for the parents and neighbours. She writes, “Neighbours are called when a brother is born, they too appreciate saying, ‘your brother born congratulation’ but they feel sad even if we are already here.”

She further questions this discriminatory attitude, “Why a brother is always important? Why neighbours also say that son is only important? Why girls are not important?”

These remarks from the girls suggest that Nepalese society is still run by the traditional patriarchal family norms that regard only son as a family heir. They regard son as the most necessary member of the family. These social preferences toward sons are also suggested by other studies in Nepal (Khanal 155; Panthee 75; Paudel 7).

### 4.3 Social function of elderly care: underlining cause of discrimination

The participants have explained why parents and society discriminate them. They know the underlying social cause of this discrimination that is based on the social practice of sending daughters off after their marriage and keeping sons in the family as a future support to the family. In Nepal, girls are known as “arka ko ghar maa jaane jaat” which means, girls as someone who go to others’ home. This social practice of keeping boys at home and sending girls off has been the main cause of discrimination.

Regarding this Suravi writes, “I have seen that the parents think that daughter is not for the long time stay in their home, so they discriminate them.”

Similarly, Rupa writes, “Parents even question girls about their going to school. They say, “What is the use of going to school when you are going away to your husband’s house?” But to boys, they say, “You are the support for me when I grow old and poor.” Girls have done nothing wrong to their parents still so please do not discriminate girls and boys.”

In the above remarks, Surabhi mentions how parents in general do not regard girls’ education as necessary just because they will not stay with them. On the other hand, she claims parents are very supportive of sending their boys to school because they expect boys to stay with them in their old age looking after them and education can make their boys skilful and increase their chances for employment.

Moving a step forward than others Aasha writes that even if parents discriminate against girls because they go away from their parents after marriage, the girls can still be responsible toward their parents. She writes, “Yes, it is true that girls must marry and leave their dad’s home, but it is not that the responsibility toward her parents ends there. It is the power and capability of a girl to handle two families.”

Here, unknowingly she refers to her house as ‘Dad’s house’ not her ‘mom’s house’. Even though this remark is impulsive, it suggests how in Nepalese society most father figures earn and possess property. The government data also suggests that the number of females possessing property is very limited than the males in Nepal (Government of Nepal, 90).

Maya writes that because boys stay with their parents, they are more valued than girls. In her words, “More respect is given to the boys because people think that girls go to others’ homes one day.”

Muna however, relates this attitude to only the past and claims that girls were deprived of education because of this attitude. She mentions, “In the past, girls were defined as ‘arkaa ko ghar jaane’, (one who goes to other's home). Due to this attitude, girls were not even sent to schools.”

Girls’ going to others’ houses is not only concerned with losing a family member to others, but also about losing family assets (Panthee 64). In Nepalese society, when a girl is married her parents have a social pressure to give valuable gifts to their daughter to take them in her in-law’s home. This culture of dowry adds pressure to the parents who are not economically sound

and makes girls a burden. Regarding this Rama writes, "They think that a daughter is useless as they will go to another house and take their land and money, car, and jewellery as dowry."

#### 4.4 Menstrual seclusion: a major problem

Menstruation seclusion is prevalent in Hindu contexts (Rothchild & Piya 922). In this practice girls during their periods are regarded as impure and withdrawn from their everyday normal activities and kept in a secluded place with limited access to facilities of everyday lives (Rothchild & Piya 927). This practice is observed for four/five days in normal periods but for 10-15 days during their first periods and after the birth of a child. Menstrual seclusion and restrictions during that time seem as a common problem currently in practice and impacting the girls as reflected in their writings. Their concern for menstrual seclusion might be because they seem experiencing these problems in their everyday lives. Although this is practiced both in cities and villages, in some parts of Nepal, especially in far western hills, this ritual is practiced severely, and girls often die during their first seclusion due to suffocation and snake bites in an unhygienic and secluded menstrual hut. They even become victims of sexual violence as they are kept far and alone from the usual residence. In this study, a maximum participant, 10 out of 16 girls mentioned menstruation in their writing. Some of the remarks about this tradition in the girls' responses are as follows:

"When we grew up, we face menstruation. We are said we are untouchables." (Nira)

"When a girl mensurates, her family puts her in a separate room. She is not even exposed to the sunlight during that time. She is not permitted to go to the temple, kitchen, and so on. This type of problem causes serious problems in a girl's life, and she faces many challenges. Girls follow such norms because their parents say so." (Sandhya)

"During periods girls should stay in a cave (maybe she meant dark room) to follow the superstitious belief." (Surabhi)

"When we are menstruating, we are not allowed to go to the kitchen, we cannot touch our brother and father. We must stay away from family." (Rupa)

"Girls are also discriminated during menstruation. This situation is more severe in villages than in cities." (Priya)

"During menstruation people think that the girls are impure. So, for the five days girls are put away from home. Many girls die while performing this ritual due to animal attacks. This is one of the main problems in Nepal." (Maya)

"During menstruation, girls should live in seclusion and in some places, they are kept in a cow's shelter for five to seven days. This should be banned. We should change our society and our thoughts." (Rama)

These remarks suggest that menstrual seclusion is one of the recurring psychological pressures for the girls who experience it every month even if Chhaupadi is banned by the Supreme Court in 2005. However, studies in this context suggest that people were not aware of the



criminalisation of the Chhaupadi (Baumann et al. 1009) and this ritual is continuing (Rothchild & Piya 927; Joshi 134; Thapa et al. 7).

#### 4.5 Problem of dowry

After menstrual seclusion, the dowry problem is another social problem suggested by the girls. Dowry is a system in which during marriage bride's family offers some necessary things and money to the groom's family as a gift (Jha 216). However, in some parts of Nepal dowry is not given as per the wish of the bride's family but it is demanded from the side of the groom's family. This culture puts economic pressure on the bride's family and makes girls burdens to their families.

The participants have expressed how dowry culture is bad and how it is a reason that contributes to gender discrimination. Some of their remarks are given below:

Rama writes, "Parents think that a daughter is useless as they will go to another house and take their land and money, car, and jewellery as dowry. Nowadays, also this culture is in practice. In many societies, this system is there which should be stopped by implementing strict rules and regulations."

"Girls face the challenges like dowry system. It is a big problem in my society as it treats girls as goods. It seems that during marriage boys' parents are selling their boys to girls' parents who are buying boys for their daughters by providing dowry." Kamana

"Girls are compared to dowry. Whenever a girl gets married, her parents donate a huge amount of money to the groom which is not good." Sarita

Dowry culture is one of the social problems prevalent in Nepal. Studies support that dowry is one of the major problems of initiating women violence especially in the southern plains of Nepal (Karki 1; Jha 216; Mahato 89).

#### 4.6 Fear of rape and sexual abuse

Another important challenge of being a girl stated by the participants included their feelings of insecurities. Sexual abuses and rape seem one of the most recurring news that impacts adolescent girls as six out of seventeen girls have mentioned it as a problem in Nepalese society.

One of the most sensitive issues of physical abuse has been expressed by Kalpana where she has explained the abuse, she and her friends faced in their school from their mathematics teacher. Regarding how this incident impacted her Kalpana writes, ". I was so sad. I stopped going to school. I stopped eating. I didn't know what to do. My family asked me why I was behaving in such a way. But I couldn't answer their question because I'm a girl."

It seems that sexual abuse is one of the most feared issues for girls. Even if sexual abuse can happen to both boys and girls; in Nepalese society it is most common among girls. Regarding this Sandhya writes, "Rape is the most serious problem which occurs to girls."

Girls are also aware of the way society treats girls when she reports that she has been raped or sexually abused. It seems that girls are also doubtful about justice regarding these cases. Regarding this Sarita writes,

“Whenever a girl gets raped, the society stands against that girl. They think now the girl is trashed. They behave like she can’t exist. After getting raped she must hide from society, and she does not get any justice.”

Sita has a lot of questions about the problem of social insecurities for girls. She questions,

“We girls are not safe in our own country even one or two-year-old girls are being raped. . . like how we can live in our own country when we are not safe here? We are not safe even in our house. I have heard in the news that a father raped his daughter.”

The news concerning rape and sexual abuse has a negative impact on both girls and their parents. Asha writes how she is thankful to her parents when they don’t let her go out at night to keep her safe from these incidents.

She writes, “Sometimes, I hear the news of a girl being raped and harassed at the clubs and parties. At that time, I thank my parents for not allowing me to go out at night.” (Asha)

These remarks from girls suggests they feel scared and threatened due to the incidents of rape and sexual abuse in the society. Although there are not many reliable studies regarding sexual abuse in Nepal (Shoib et al. 1), studies suggest intimate partner violence (Yoshikawa et al. 4045) and cases of physical and sexual abuse among adolescent school-going girls (Pandey et al. 1; Thapalia et al. 427). Cases of sexual harassment in public transport in Nepal (Neupane & Chesney-Lind 33; Gautam et al. 105; Mishra & Lamichhane 20) are other concerned issue in Nepal. Some studies also claim negative learning outcomes on girls due to fear of sexual harassment (Gyawali & Maharjan 92; Panthee 75), Not only that a study reviewing 20 years of rape and attempted rape cases suggests that there is a rapid growth in the number of such incidents in Nepal (Atreya et al. 2).

## 5.0 DISCUSSION

As gender configurations vary according to the contexts (Connell 5) some contextual social norms and status reflected in the responses of the girls suggest the beliefs and norms practiced in the Nepalese society. These gender positionings might be unusual for audiences who are not familiar with the South Asian women’s context. Nevertheless, the women’s issues raised by adolescent girls have highlighted some important women issues in their context. The important discussion raised by the findings can be summarised under these various topics.

### 5.1 A sense of existential crisis

Although few respondents have confessed in their writings that their parents are happy with them as their children, suggesting some parents in modern days are not obsessed with having sons. However, the social pressure they face being only daughters gives them emotional torture. Not only that, but girls are also aware how their birth is not celebrated like their brothers, how most of the parents wait for the birth of their son, how they are othered since their birth only



because they are girl, and they will leave their parents once married. This understanding of gender biased attitudes prevalent in their family and overall society puts question marks on their existence. This gender bias and male preferences are also proven by other studies in Nepal (Khanal 155; Panthee 75; Lammichhane et al. 41). This indicates a sense of existential crisis for the girls as they are less preferred in the society and family itself. The concerned authorities, gender policymakers, and social welfare organisations should address this sense of disapproval of girls' existence.

### **5.2 A feeling of insecurity in girls**

Another important issue coming from the findings is the sense of insecurity among girls. The girls feel unsafe in society and in some contexts even within the family as they are exposed to a lot of sexual violence and harassment cases without any lawful conclusion. Due to a sense of insecurity, they are ready to accept the social restrictions imposed upon themselves. The tendency of naturalising female insecurity and justifying the social and familial restrictions for girls is dehumanising as it snatches away the freedom from girls and makes them dependent. The social reality of Nepalese society also suggests that there is gradual increment of attempted rape and cases of sexual harassment (Atreya et al. 2). Majority of the secondary school girls (Thapalia et al 427) and girls studying in undergraduates (Bhatta et al. 90) have reported being a victim of sexual harassment. Sexual harassment is also reported in public transport in Kathmandu (Gautam et al. 105; Mishra & Lamichhane 20). Some studies suggest girls' schooling is also impacted by the fear of sexual harassment on the way to or back to school (Panthee 72). Fear of sexual harassment also impacts girls' learning outcomes (Gyawali & Maharjan, 92).

### **5.3 Some challenges unique to the Nepalese context**

Some of the gender norms suggest unique to the South Asian norms coming from Hindu background that might be unfamiliar to the Western audiences. For example, norms regarding seclusion during post pregnancy and monthly menstrual cycles. As suggested in the findings, this ritual is observed by most of the population although, in some areas of the far western hills, it is observed very strictly grabbing the attention of national and international media. This is also a most repeated theme in the writing responses of the girls suggesting that this ritual impacts them negatively.

Attitudes such as girls as others, and for others' family might also be strange in the modern days. Especially in the Western contexts when children are adult both girls and boys leave their parental house to live independently however, in Nepal children especially sons live with their parents and daughters live with their parents-in-law. This social system fulfils to run the family smoothly as both children and elderly people are managed and taken care of by the family members themselves. However, this system alienates daughters from their parents as parents from the birth of their daughters take daughters as someone who will leave them. This impacts the overall upbringing of the girls and restricts them from opportunities as much as like the boys in the family. This is one of the core reasons why parents prefer sons over daughters.

The Issue of dowry is another issue raised by the girls in their responses. Dowry is mostly prevalent in the eastern plains. This system brings both bride and dowry to the groom's home whereas girls' parents lose both family assets and their daughter. Therefore, this system impacts

negatively to both bride and her parents. Even giving and taking of dowry is regarded as illegal, this practice is still prevalent in Nepal (Jha 216; Mahato 89). Studies confirm this issue in Nepal as a hindrance to gender parity (Karki 1; Mahato 89).

## 6.0 CONCLUSION

This article unearths some crucial issues regarding women through the eyes of Nepalese adolescent high school girls. The issues such as gender discrimination, male preferences, the tendency of othering girls due to the social structure that demands only girls to move away from the parental home after marriage, dehumanising menstrual practices, feelings of insecurity and fear of sexual violence, and the problem of dowry prevalent in the society are some of the issues indicated by girls that puts them in a disadvantage position. It is important to notice that they only highlighted the negative aspects of being a woman in Nepalese society suggesting a depressing environment for the females. This certainly makes girls' position vulnerable and demands some quick actions from the stakeholders who are working for gender equality and in the position of implementing law to make the situation better.

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