



**ALiGN**

**Advancing Learning and Innovation on Gender Norms**

**BRIEFING**

**Narratives of change and challenges in  
overcoming discriminatory gender norms  
and practices in Nepal**

Carol Watson in collaboration with Anita Ghimire and Tulasha Khadka | August 2019

# Key messages

- Positive changes in discriminatory gender norms and practices in Nepal have expanded options and improved capabilities for women and girls in critical domains.** These include: rising levels of education for girls as more parents see the value of educating daughters as well as sons and as more educational opportunities become available; greater voice for and acceptance of women in politics and public life; expanded economic opportunities for women, including in roles that were previously reserved for men; and significant improvements in reproductive health care and rights. There has also been some relaxation in marriage arrangements and practices, with girls having more of a say in who they marry and when, and a slow erosion of mobility restrictions that have characterised the lives of women and girls. Discrimination and stigmatisation against certain categories of vulnerable women, such as widows, is slowly decreasing.
- This progress has been brought about through a combination of factors.** Social movements and the drive for democracy in the 1990s served as a key stimulus and force for social transformation, equity and inclusion, within which women's collective efforts for gender equality have been couched. Through new civil society organisations (CSOs) and political processes, women activists have contributed to a gender-friendly Constitution and significant legal reform around women's rights, while women's political participation has been promoted through quotas at all levels of government. Education and health services have expanded and become better quality and more gender-inclusive, contributing to the empowerment of more women and girls and facilitating the flow of information and awareness. For many of our study participants, the transition from a rural to urban environment, coupled with higher education, has also opened the door to expanded economic opportunities, increased autonomy and the exercise of individual agency. Supportive families, mentors and men have also played a critical role in enabling women to pursue and realise their rights and capabilities.
- But progress has been uneven and partial, and significant disparities remain, partly due to discriminatory norms.** In spite of progressive laws and policies, implementation has often been weak on the ground, creating a disconnect between national aspirations and local realities. Some categories of women, such as widows, continue to struggle for their rights, while others, such as minority women, face a double burden of caste or ethnicity and gender. Rural women and girls in many areas continue to suffer from heavy workloads, limited autonomy and educational deprivation. The intersectionality of women's lives creates a complex web of social and cultural expectations and obligations that make it hard to move forward in achieving full gender equality.
- Challenges persist in particularly 'sticky' norms around cultural concepts of 'purity' and women's roles in family and society.** Some of these derive from deep-rooted attitudes and practices linked to the predominantly patriarchal social structures of Nepal, based on patrilineal inheritance, patrilocal residence and son preference. Within such structures, women's sexuality and social behaviours (such as dress, mobility, contacts with men) are still tightly controlled, as women are expected to uphold the family's reputation. While individual women are able to negotiate around some of the injustices and limitations imposed by the discriminatory social norms embedded in patriarchy, many still struggle for equality as they work hard to fulfil both the changing expectations and demands of economic empowerment and social responsibilities within the family and extended household. The effective exercise of political power also remains a struggle at all levels.

- **Strategic priorities for moving forward entail sustained, integrated and locally tailored action on a number of fronts.** This will require continued, broad-based efforts around social mobilisation and awareness-raising, to try to retain and further the momentum towards equality and inclusion created by the social movements of the 1990s. Further safeguarding of rights in law is needed, as well as much greater attention to the implementation and enactment of laws and policies on the ground. The continued expansion of quality education is a key priority, along with the equitable promotion of economic opportunities. Integrated development approaches are critical to moving the agenda forward, since women's empowerment is a complex whole with intertwining social, economic and political dimensions. And finally, given both the diversity of socio-cultural settings and structures as well as the disparities that mark women's status and development in Nepal, there is a need for differentiated, context-specific approaches that start from the bottom-up and take into account women's own voices and priorities for change.

# Introduction

## Research background, aims and methodology

This briefing note summarises findings from a qualitative study undertaken in Nepal as part of a History and Change research series of the Advancing Learning and Innovation on Gender Norms (ALIGN) project<sup>1</sup>. ALIGN is led by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. It seeks to further knowledge-sharing and innovation to ensure that evidence and learning on norm change informs more effective policy and practice in promotion of gender justice and women's empowerment.

The History and Change research seeks to pull together and draw lessons from personal narratives and analyses of change and resistance in gender norms, expectations and behaviours as these play out against a backdrop of broader social, economic and political processes. The overall aim is to enhance understanding of the factors that enable or challenge positive changes as these are perceived and experienced through the lives of individual women at national level.

The research has been guided by the project's conceptual understanding of gender norms – both how they operate and how they either change or resist change<sup>2</sup>. It is also underpinned by current thinking around gender justice and entitlements and has been informed by the capabilities approach to human development, which posits that progress across the life cycle in a number of key domains is critical to the empowerment of women and girls and their equitable attainment and exercise of full capabilities. Narrative investigations have therefore covered norms around: household and family relations; education; physical integrity and health; psychosocial well-being; and political and civic participation.

*Fieldwork in Nepal* was undertaken in Kathmandu over two weeks in November 2018, with 51 study participants in total (43 women and 8 young men), through:

- 18 in-depth individual interviews (IDIs) that captured the experiences of women of different ages and professional profiles, including those who work in government, politics, law, national and international NGOs, the private sector and academia;
- 4 intergenerational interviews (IGIs) with grandmothers, mothers and daughters or daughters-in-law;
- 4 small group interviews with minority ward representatives, health workers, researchers and civil society activists;
- 1 focus group discussion with a mixed group of MA students;
- 1 key informant interview (KII) with a university gender studies expert;
- a literature review to add background information and context to the findings.

Study participants were asked about their own experiences of gender norms over their life course as well as their perceptions of broader changes, progress and constraints over time in gender equality and women's empowerment. While the sample included women of different ethnicities, castes, religions and geographic localities (though all currently residents of the capital, Kathmandu), the experiences, analyses and perceptions that form the basis of our findings remain partial, and are not intended to be representative of all Nepali women. Nor does the report pretend to offer in-depth analysis of the complex socio-cultural and political forces that combine in different ways to shape experiences of gender and its intersectionality in Nepal. The findings are rather meant to be illuminative only, and – as the study itself – are offered here as a means of giving voice to individual women's experiences and insights into the gendered realities that they have encountered and the changes that they perceive.

<sup>1</sup> Full results of the study can be found here

<sup>2</sup> For more information, please see the ALIGN website at <https://www.alignplatform.org/FAQ>

## National context

Nepal is an ecologically and culturally diverse country, where caste, class, ethnicity, religion and livelihood potential contribute to different opportunities and constraints for different groups of people and combine to shape the experiences of women and girls, and how they are able to navigate gender norms. Predominantly rural, Nepal's economy relies heavily on agriculture, as well as remittances from extensive (primarily male) labour out-migration. While the poverty rate has reduced significantly in recent years, a quarter of the population still lives below the poverty line (Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), 2012; National Planning Commission (NPC), 2018; Ministry of Finance, 2017).

Government commitment to promoting gender equality and women's empowerment has strengthened significantly in recent times, particularly since the advent of democracy. Women were especially active in the social movements of the 1990s (Yadav, 2017; Mawby and Applebaum, 2018) and have gained heightened political representation through a quota system at different levels of government (Limbu, 2018). Legal reform has been a key thrust in promoting gender equality and numerous laws have been enacted to protect women's rights in numerous domains, bolstered by and in accordance with provisions in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW Shadow Report Preparation Committee, 2016). The adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action in 1995 was an important milestone, following which Nepal established a separate Ministry for Women, Children and Senior Citizens (Beyond Beijing Committee, 2017). A number of activist CSOs have also been created to promote and safeguard women's human rights, and a coalition formed to pursue a common platform for women (Forum for Women, Law and Development (FWLD) website; Women's Human Rights (WHR) website; Inter Party Women's Alliance (IPWA) n.d.). Most indicators of women's well-being demonstrate significant improvements in sexual and reproductive health (SRH) rights, education, economic empowerment, and protection (Ministry of Health et al., 2017; Ministry of Population and Environment, 2017), with sectoral programmes in place to further these gains. Successive national development plans have recognised gender equality as critical to poverty reduction (Upreti et al., 2010).

Nevertheless, significant challenges remain. Progressive laws and policies suffer from weak implementation and progress has been uneven across the different geographic and social groupings, with patterns of exclusion and inclusion often correlated with demographic, socioeconomic and cultural background. Girls' education is still limited in some areas by the unequal division of labour within the household as well as early marriage, which causes dropouts as they advance from primary to secondary (Haug and Aasland, 2015; Bennett et al., 2013; Ghimire and Samuels, 2014; Acharya et al., 2010; WHR website).

Though many harmful and discriminatory practices have been outlawed, some persist in different geographical areas, such as chhaupadi (isolating menstruating girls and women in huts separate from the main home), accusations of witchcraft, and the practice of polygyny in different forms, while some women continue to suffer from lack of awareness and autonomy in reproductive health (CARE, 2015; Gurung, 2016; NPC, 2017; Ministry of Health and Population et al., 2012). Women's economic empowerment is hindered, among other things, by their dual responsibilities within the household; gender disparities in access to land and other resources (in spite of recent laws on equal inheritance); and restrictions on mobility that prevent them from benefiting from economic opportunities (Sharma and Rasaili, 2016; International Organization for Migration (IOM), 2016; NPC, 2017). Women and girls also continue to experience different forms of gender-based violence, while access to justice remains limited due to a variety of constraints (National Judiciary Academy, 2016; United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2018).

In the traditional hill Brahmin family where this professional woman in her 50s grew up, her brothers were allowed to go out to play after school while she had to stay at home to help her mother: *'I determined to study law to determine if it was just at the household level where such discrimination took place or if it was also there in law.'*

The father of this professional woman in her 40s was 'stereotypical' around gender norms in their Newar home in Kathmandu – allowing her brother more freedom of movement and the most food at meals and reserving inheritance for him. Her mother, though a professional woman herself, acquiesced to traditional gender norms for, *'When they returned in the evening my father would just sit down to have a drink, while my mother did all of the housework.'*

# Narratives of growing up and coming of age

## Experiences of childhood and adolescence

Narratives of childhood and growing up reflect a diversity of experiences, varying by region, urban or rural setting, caste or ethnicity, class, level of education of parents, and age, but also by personal circumstances and individual character. Some study participants reported that they felt cherished at home and valued equally with their brothers; others found that their brothers were given more freedom, personal mobility and certain advantages – for example, in education and in ceremonies.

A professional woman in her 40s described how her mother would call her in when she was in the 8th grade and playing football to tell her that now she was big and should not play this game with boys anymore. When menstruation started, she knew that she was not allowed to touch certain things in the kitchen, water, or statues of the gods. She did not feel that this was because she was considered impure, but just accepted it as part of their religion.

Many participants experienced adolescence as a time when they began to encounter stronger gender differentiation and expectations. These were manifested through: greater restrictions on unsupervised movement; admonishments to abstain from sports and act like ‘ladies’; reduced contacts (for some) with boys; and the inculcation of beliefs and practices around menstruation as something that requires special acts of purification.

## Determined struggles for education

With the exception of some of the older women in our intergenerational interviews, and one woman from the mountains, our study participants all benefited from the expanded educational opportunities available in Nepal in recent decades. Some grew up with the value of education instilled in them by their parents. Others had to withstand social pressures pushing them towards early marriage and to fight for their right to education on an equal par with their brothers. In rural areas in particular, *‘The work of girls was not seen as studying, but of staying home. Studying was only for the big jobs that were the ones requiring going out – and those were for men. So there were many girls of my age who didn’t go to school – they had to stay home on the farming’* (professional woman).

Some participants reported instances where families send their sons to the more prestigious English-medium private schools while sending their daughters to the lower-quality government schools (with many girls subsequently dropping out early for marriage). But this had not been the case for most of our study participants who, themselves, saw the emancipatory power that could accrue from quality education at higher levels and negotiated through their personal circumstances, often within their own families, around ways to attain this, which usually involved negotiating the time and circumstances of marriage.

A professor from eastern Terai, now 50, grew up in a Madhesi community where norms for girls are very stringent. When she went to India to further her studies after her School Leaving Certificate, her neighbours and relatives were all saying that as a girl she would get ‘spoiled’ there. But her father held strong. She married during the last year of her BA on condition that the man accept her desire to pursue her education as far as possible. She underwent a lot of pressure and ‘torture’, with neighbours gossiping and continuously asking her husband and his family, *‘Why are you letting her study like this?’* But she persevered and eventually earned her PhD, while also supporting her husband’s higher education.

## Growing up into political activism

Some women's childhoods were greatly influenced by the political unrest and social uprisings at the time, forging the early roots of political activism. A number of our participants grew up in villages marked by intensive political activity, both leading up to and continuing during the Maoist movement of 1996–2006. In this context, they became aware of gender and other inequalities and developed the desire to combat injustices they experienced themselves in both norms and practices.

# Narratives of marriage and family

## Entering into marriage

The formal and informal rules regarding marriage in Nepal vary significantly between regions, ethnic groups and castes. People commonly look within their socioeconomic group, caste or ethnic group for prospective marriage partners and there was a continued tradition of arranged marriages among our study participants. There were also, however, cases of 'love marriage', even among the older generation, and these are said to be growing in acceptability – as one participant told her family: *'You don't need to help me find a husband – I can do this by myself'* (CSO officer). And there were a few examples of 'elopement', including in cases of inter-caste marriages, which are still socially taboo. Dowry systems prevail among some groups but not others; our study participants reported diverse experiences of and perspectives on dowry and bride wealth.

Age at first marriage is also quite varied, but most indicators, as well as findings from our discussions, point to a gradual rise. This is linked both to the transition from a purely agrarian society to more urban settings where more employment outside of agriculture is available and to expanded educational opportunities for women. Reporting on the pressures on girls to get married, one young professional woman noted that *'All of this used to start after the BA – now it starts after the MA'* (group discussion, female researchers). In the more rural parts of the country where these conditions do not apply, our study participants informed us that young girls often marry at a much earlier age.

*In our grandparents' and parents' time the tradition was for arranged marriages, and families decided before the bride or groom met. In our generation, everyone – relatives, parents – are happy to allow us to get married on their own, but they still need to meet the boy to make sure he is OK. As long as they are from the same caste, parents will allow love marriages, and today 60%–70% are love marriages.'* (Young woman, MA student)

## Experiences within marriage

Traditionally, women move into their husband's family home at marriage. This means couples generally expect daughter(s)-in-law to join the extended household of the father-in-law as new members of the family; they also usually take the name and caste designation of the husband's family. Most of our study participants followed this pattern. Others, however, had established their own households. Some of those who lived in extended household arrangements expressed appreciation for the care and support of in-laws; others, however, described intense strain in situations where, as daughters-in-law, they were overworked and felt under-appreciated.

Childbearing is expected of all married couples and until recently men have been allowed by law to take another wife if the first did not bear children. The pressure to bear at least one son is also quite strong, linked to patterns of patrilineal transmission of the family name and property as well as (among Hindus) the ritual significance of sons in performing funeral rites for parents. As one young woman explains, *'In Hindu culture, only a son can open the door of heaven for the mother and father'* (MA students). One study participant in her late 30s has been married for 12 years but has only one daughter; her husband had just returned from several years of work abroad, so now she says *'Everyone is waiting!'* Her mother-in-law is encouraging her to get pregnant, even at her relatively advanced age, and they have consulted the astrological charts for the most auspicious dates for the birth of a boy. Her mother-in-law says: *'It is destiny – a child will come or not, but still try.'*

*'I had always felt like a son in my house and never felt that I had to live the life of a daughter either in the way I talked or what I wore or other activities. But at my in-laws' place, I realised the real difference between men and women – and a daughter-in-law in particular. I found myself in a completely different environment and I am really suppressed. All I can say is that my in-laws never wanted a wife for their son, but instead they wanted a daughter-in-law for themselves. That is what I have realised.'* (Recently married woman in her 20s)

Average family size is decreasing, though, as the economy changes, as women enter the professional world, and as family planning practices have become more widespread. As one young woman explained: *'The in-laws now approve of and promote the daughter-in-law's work so they accept her putting off having children'* (group discussion, female researchers).

Conditions of childbirth for women have also changed significantly, including the women in our study, with growing urbanisation and availability of health services. One 90-year-old grandmother explained that when she was younger, in her rural Gurung community, *'Often the woman just gave birth while working out in the fields – she would cut the umbilical cord with her scythe, wash the baby off with grass, and come home carrying both baby and the grass she had cut for fodder. All of my sons were born like that.'*

## Divorce and widowhood

Divorce is considered a last resort and is usually avoided; it is more common for a couple to separate permanently while remaining legally married. There was only one example of divorce in our small sample of study participants: there were, however, a couple of cases of de facto separation.

While laws safeguarding the rights of widows have recently come into force, widowhood remains a perilous time for many women who, on the death of their husband, are often dependent for support on their remaining male kin – including in-laws and sons. They are also commonly subjected to certain social and cultural restrictions, particularly among some social groups marked by Hindu traditions of sati, whereby widows would be expected to throw themselves on their husband's funeral pyre since she is considered the 'half-body' of the husband and expected to take care of him in the after-life (CSO officer). It is common for men (widowers) to remarry, but for a woman to do so would contravene gendered social norms. Four of our study participants were widows; two were experiencing difficulties in obtaining their share of their late husband's property.

*'People do not want the problems of widows and household relations and such to go outside of the private sphere into the public realm of policy. In-laws do not want their daughters-in-law to gain awareness and claim rights!'*

(Widow, in her 60s)

# Narratives of professional engagement and collective agency

All of the women we spoke to – except some of the younger ones who were still studying – were doing, or had been doing, some type of work outside of the household. And even students often held down part-time or full-time jobs to support themselves. Older study participants from the rural areas had mostly been limited to agricultural activities. Others in the middle and younger generations were successfully engaged in a wide spectrum of professions in both the public and private sectors, with many assuming leadership positions that effectively broke barriers in expectations of women's work.



From the first woman to hold the highest district office in Nepal, to the first woman to summit the country's second highest and most technically difficult mountain peak, to the first policewoman in her family – our participants proved over and over again that, in the words of one, *'women can do anything'*. One became the first-ever woman to be elected head of a national business organisation. Another honed her skills as a lawyer to engage in – and win – public interest litigation cases on behalf of women, founding a new women's rights organisation in the process. One fought for ever higher levels of education to become a university professor, all the while balancing the demands of her extended family. Some rose from political activism to occupy top levels of leadership in their parties, using these as a platform to advance women's rights. Others worked through both governmental and non-governmental structures to mobilise women and support social transformation in some of the most remote rural areas.

## Engaging in political mobilisation and participation to augment women's voice

A number of our study participants active in the political movements of the 1990s have since assumed leadership positions in various parties, working with others on a common platform for women and helping to draft a gender-sensitive Constitution (2015): *'We were afraid that men, with their patriarchal mind-set, would not put in women's rights, so we formed a women's caucus to work on this. We did not always agree on everything, but we did agree on women's rights. We were worried that men were leaving women out and that gave us energy to overcome our differences'* (Maoist party activist). Others serve as minority ward representatives to advance the interests of Dalit and indigenous women, *'who face gender as well as caste discrimination'* (minority women's ward representative). All have encountered opportunities as well as constraints as women, with discriminatory gender norms encountered at different levels.

### The strength of norms at the grassroots

Bringing village women together was difficult at first. People would evoke a Nepali proverb about how silly it was to see 'hens crowing' if a woman dared to speak in public. As she tried to mobilise women, people in the village would point an accusing finger at her and say, *'Look, this daughter-in-law is stirring up our daughters-in-law and taking them out of the house.'* (Maoist activist)

## Working through government structures for women's empowerment

Several participants seized upon new opportunities for women in government and service provision, working in various capacities to help bring about social development in Nepal. Their stories reflect both the ground-breaking nature of their roles as women as well as the particular gender-based constraints women face in public life and communities.

### The strength of norms at the centre

*'There is a general feeling that things are easier for women during times of peace. But actually, for example, women were more represented among the Maoists – 40% – and everything was tolerated. But now, after the peace process, they have barely 15%. So it seems that the forest is a good place for women, but not society. When women are linked back into society it becomes more difficult.'* (Marxist-Leninist activist)

## Strengthening women's rights through civil society

The 1990s witnessed a burgeoning of CSOs established to promote social justice and fight gender and other forms of inequality. We spoke with a number of women, as well as men, active in CSOs working to promote and safeguard women's human rights in Nepal. These include: work on law reform and gender-equitable policies for all categories of women; advocacy and legal protection for widows; and field-based community development efforts. All of these demonstrate passionate commitment to social justice and the conviction that collective agency can make a difference in challenging and changing discriminatory norms and practices.

- **The first woman to hold high-level office at district level**, now in her 70s, found advantages and disadvantages as a woman. As a widow with no children or family to support, she was not obliged (as were most of her male colleagues) to seek supplemental income to augment her salary and faced no difficulties with transfers. However, she had to be extremely careful of public decorum and circumscribe her behaviour, as even a hint of impropriety would destroy her credibility. *'In your district functions, you are surrounded by men – a driver, guard, boy – all men, so you have to be careful. A woman has to guard her reputation.'*
- **A woman in a leadership position in a government ministry** has focused on women at grassroots, noting different regional levels of progress and stressing that *'For the department, the accent is on working with local values, for until and unless people become internally convinced of something, they will not change.'*
- **Government health service workers** address challenges of sexual and reproductive health (SRH) service provision and outreach in rural and peri-urban areas. Uptake of family planning is increasing among the more-educated women but is a challenge for others who want large families and particularly sons. While sex-selective abortions have been banned for 10 years, *'In our culture,'* as one health worker explained, *'We need a son – the son has to tend to the death rituals of his elders. So even if sex-selective abortions are now illegal and cost more for clandestine operations, people will pay.'* Meanwhile, traditional norms against education for girls have blunted the full impact of the government's long-standing female community health volunteers (FCHV) programme, as most volunteers initially recruited had no formal education, and currently only about 1 in 10 can read and write.

## Breaking gender barriers in the private sector

A number of participants were active in the private sector, including in professions formerly reserved for men, and have achieved distinction in their fields, serving in many ways as trailblazers and role models for other women. Their stories depict an evolution in the range of career possibilities available to women. They also suggest that the drive to achieve individual empowerment and distinction in one's career can contribute to chipping away at social norms that discriminate against women's participation in various professional fields more broadly. And finally, they indicate that some women may bring to their jobs a special concern for other women, and work towards broader collective advancement.

The founder of an influential human rights CSO filed her first public interest litigation case for girls' inheritance in 1993 and won, arguing that existing law contravened both the Constitution and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, which Nepal had ratified. It took eight years to pass, as it was not easily accepted by the 'patriarchal mind-set'. MPs (mostly male) objected loudly and would ask: *'Why are you trying to destroy the fabric of society and our social structure? The door of your maternal home will be closed to you.'* *This is because the 'ideal daughter' is one who leaves the property to her brothers, who will in turn care for her as guardians if she faces problems subsequently in marriage. 'If you argue to retain this property for girls as well, you are seen as disruptive.'* But she persevered and the Supreme Court has ordered that it be turned into a Bill as part of equal rights legislation. Among other cases she took on were the ban on *chhaupaudi*, which took 13 years of advocacy before it was prohibited; and the reframing of marital rape as a sexual offence. One young lawyer working for the organisation noted with pride that *'All of the cases we have argued have been positive', but pointed out that 'There are still many more to advance.'*

## Balancing the double day

A number of women expressed challenges in combining both work and family responsibilities, particularly as family responsibilities were linked to the extended family. While there is ever-growing acceptance of and expectations for women's work outside of the household – particularly in the urban economy with its expanded economic opportunities – changes in some of the traditional household roles and expectations have not yet caught up, with women still assuming most of the responsibility: *'In women's lives, everything is dependent on family issues – the in-laws, one's own parents, the husband, the children – it is all tangled up ... Yes, we are lucky to have been educated and have job experience, but there are also a lot of pressures building up'* (young professional woman).

A Sherpa woman in her 50s grew up in a small mountain village and started working as a porter at age 13 when she was taken out of school by her father: *'I started out as a porter and slowly rose up the ranks. The dream of all porters is to become kitchen help so that they can get enough food to eat, so I became kitchen help. The dream of all kitchen girls is to become a guide so they won't have to carry equipment; so I became a guide. And the dream of all guides is to have their own agency; so I opened my own with my brother at the age of 28. I went step by step, fulfilling my dreams.'*

It was not easy to make her way on the mountain, which *'was a man's world ... Male porters only had to worry about carrying their loads, while female porters had to protect themselves from sexual aggression – if not, they would see the results nine months down the line and would be rejected by their families'*.

She participated in the first women's Everest summit attempt, which created a group of women, Everest Team Leaders. She is currently a leading member of various mountaineering and mountain development organisations in Nepal, with two autobiographical books to her name.

## Analysis of progress moving forward

### Positive changes in gender norms and practices

Study participants mostly agreed that there has been much progress over time. These include, in particular: rising levels of education for girls as more parents see the value of educating daughters as well as sons and as more educational opportunities become available at all levels; and greater access to information about many issues, leading to heightened awareness of rights.

There has also been greater acceptance of women in politics and public life, and expanded economic opportunities for women (including in domains previously reserved for men), which brings empowerment: *'If a woman can earn, she does not have to look pleadingly into the faces of others, dependent on them to support her'* (IGI grandmother, widowed). In addition, knowledge of and access to services SRH services has improved significantly: *'Nowadays, in Kathmandu, the woman visits the doctor as soon as she is one month pregnant – but back there [in the village in her day] if they die, they die'* (IGI, grandmother).

The value of the girl child seems to be more accepted today, and the mobility restrictions that have characterised the lives of women and girls are slowly being eroded, at least in some parts of the country. Particularly vulnerable categories of women, such as minority women and widows, are becoming more empowered to speak out against the weight of oppressive norms and attitudes, while discriminatory practices such as *chbhaupadi* are declining: *'In the far west, women themselves have destroyed the chbhaupadi huts'* (small group discussion, women health workers).

*'I think the change in the thoughts of my generation has come about mainly due to education and also due to the awareness that we get every day through social media. We are getting vast experiences apart from only the schooling knowledge. Everything has changed in our time as compared to our grandparents' time. There are changes in culture and behaviour as well. There are men these days who do not feel any differences between a man and a woman.'* (Young professional woman)

There has also been some relaxation in marriage arrangements and practices, with girls having a greater say in whom they marry and when. Many of our study participants pointed to such changes in their own lives, while intergenerational interviews also revealed significant positive changes over time.

*'Women's representation in political affairs has risen through the 33% quota at provincial and federal levels and 40% reservation as candidates at the local level. This is the only country in the region where this system is actually in practice and women are doing good jobs.'* (Development worker)

*'To be born a woman used to be considered a curse from the God Indra. So when my own first child was a boy, I was happy – I didn't want a daughter. And the same with the second. Now, however, I feel that I was totally wrong – that is the change that has occurred in me!!!'* (Government official)

*'Girls now have wings like a scooter! Girls and women can now travel alone from place to place at any time.'* (Mother)

## Key enabling factors

Moving from rural areas to urban Kathmandu was seen as one factor contributing to change across generations, as urban areas tend to offer more educational opportunities, economic choices and opportunities for social mixing, thereby facilitating transformation in some of the social norms and expectations around girls and women. *'Progress is faster in urban environments: social transformation works better in and is facilitated by mixed societies'* (government officer).

This then creates a ripple effect, as higher levels of education and participation in work and professions at all levels have empowered women to exercise choices and challenge norms. Access to higher education, in turn, has served as a foundation for women and girls to seize opportunities in the economic, political and social spheres that were hitherto closed off to them.

Expanded access to services in general – from schools to health centres – has contributed to norm change in both attitudes (through the ideas and information transmitted) and behaviours (as they provided spaces that were increasingly closer to home, making it easier and more acceptable for girls and women to attend). Enhanced access to various media and communications also served as a vehicle for the transmission of new ideas and possibilities, and rising levels of awareness of rights.

Individual and collective agency both emerged as significant in processes of change. At the individual level, girls and women exercised agency when they negotiated for higher levels of education, later marriage and/or choice of partner, equal participation in religious ceremonies and politics, more equitable gender relations within the household, and jobs in sectors traditionally set aside for men. Supportive family members, mentors and men have also played an important role in helping women expand their capabilities and carve out more equitable social relations.

At the collective level, women's participation in the social movements of the 1990s, including the drive towards democracy and the revolutionary fervour against all forms of social injustice, helped to raise awareness of gender discrimination and to mobilise action against it. This was also a time when civil society flourished, with a number of new CSOs established to promote women's rights. Women's leadership in advocacy efforts and law reform undertaken by these CSOs have all distinctly contributed to moving the agenda forward, as have government efforts to promote women in development. Participation in global debates about women and development and in fora such as the Beijing World Conference on Women, coupled with the adoption of international instruments such as CEDAW, contributed to the national agenda and helped situate the struggle of Nepali women within a wider, global movement.

*On how she overcame the 'shame' and stigma of attending school after menstruating, 'I am a person who has been combative from the outset'. (Grandmother)*

*On refusing to change her name after marriage, 'Why should I? That is my identity since I was born, so why should I change it? I have been a rebel on this.' (Development worker)*

Enshrining women's rights in law – through the Constitution and sector-specific laws as well as in broad-based policies – has been critical to the progress achieved. Over the 1990s and 2000s women have gained legal protection from violence, enhanced property rights, safeguards on political participation and representation, and greater awareness of their human rights. New civil and criminal codes have been developed and contradictory laws repealed, *'with 16 new rights now encoded in law'* (male CSO staff). And along the way, family support and encouragement by others have also been essential enabling factors for women, in the form of educated or enlightened parents, supportive teachers, gender-sensitive husbands and understanding in-laws.

*'The international and national women's movements have contributed to awareness-raising on and among women – this includes through social media such as Facebook but also through mainstream media. Even in rural areas where there may be no social media or TV, they have progressive FM radio programmes that raise awareness. CSOs also raise awareness through their programmes out in rural areas.'* (Male CSO staff)

*'I consider myself a very lucky lady from the beginning as both my paternal family and my husband's family encouraged me and there is mutual respect between myself, my father, my husband and my son – everyone equal... We are all helping each other.'* (IDI, private sector entrepreneur)

*'We respect women's empowerment and in turn we get respect.'* (Male CSO officers working on women's rights)

## Analysis of obstacles, constraints and 'sticky norms'

In spite of this significant progress, obstacles to full gender equality and empowerment for women have been encountered on many levels. Some of these derive from deep-rooted attitudes and practices linked to the predominantly patriarchal social structures of Nepal, based on patrilineal inheritance, patrilocal residence and son preference, as well as the gendered division of responsibilities and resources within the household and community.

Within these patriarchal structures, women's sexuality and social behaviour is still tightly controlled, as women are expected to uphold the family's reputation, first as a good daughter, then as a good wife and daughter-in-law – always under some form of male control. A key obstacle to progress, therefore, is seen to be *'woman's lack of rights over her body'* (group discussion, MA students).

*'A woman's reputation is like water in a yam's leaves – even a small slip and it will fall off.'* (Researcher)

*'For a woman, her own body is her foe!'* (Mountaineer)

*'In Nepali cultures, morality and goodness are all linked up into sexual activities – for women, not for men.'* (CSO officer)

While individual women are able to negotiate around some of the injustices and limitations imposed by these patriarchal structures, and collective effort is chipping away at some of the foundations, many women still struggle for equality as they work hard to fulfil both the changing expectations and demands of economic empowerment and social responsibilities within the family and extended household.

*'Parents still think of daughters as a burden and feel a lightness and relief when they are married off. Daughters are the prestige of the family and if they do something bad or elope, it reflects badly on the family, so there is a sense of relief when she is married off and parents don't have to worry about her anymore.'* (Grandmother)

Other challenges highlighted by our study participants include the lack of implementation of the progressive laws and policies that have been introduced. This is coupled with continuing gaps in the legal protection of women's rights, particularly around property and citizenship.

*'People never see policies – they are just flying about in rumours. Even service providers don't know them.'*  
(Development worker)

*'There is a gap between the actions of the government in terms of policies, proclamations and laws – which are progressive – and society at the grassroots'* (group discussion, MA students)

*'Although there are laws now, culture is deep-rooted ... The law has changed before social mind-sets have changed.'*  
(group discussion, MA students)

In spite of the significant progress achieved and the quotas established for participation in public life, there remains a continuing struggle for effective political representation and voice at all levels. Current struggles by women trying to exert leadership positions within party structures are contrasted with the earlier revolutionary euphoria, at a time when women felt that participation was easier. While women have 33% representation in Parliament, none of the political parties have 33% of women in leading positions.

Moreover, in the extremely diverse socio-cultural and economic settings of Nepal, development has been uneven, with disparities continuing to mark women's lives based on factors such as caste and class, ethnicity, religion, region, urban/rural location, educational attainment, and social status (for example, widowhood, which continues to confer additional vulnerability on many women).

*'It is just talk – and we are still struggling with this. Men are resisting this because, of course, if women come in, men will go out.'* (Political leader)

*'Even when we have women representatives, we always have to fight for things – men might not say no to us outright, but they will go around and around and in the end their voice prevails.'* (Minority women's representative)

*'This shows the strength of the patriarchal mind-set – as long as the older generation is there, this will not be changed easily. Parliament is mostly male – there is a 33% obligatory representation by women, but women parliamentarians themselves are not always clear about things regarding gender discrimination.'* (CSO officer)

*'Gender equality is progressing more in urban areas than in rural areas. Lack of education and ingrained cultural values and norms are the reasons for gender discrimination.'* (Group discussion, MA students).

*'At the same time, regional, ethnic and religious differences can cross-cut the urban/rural divide and there are larger problems of social inclusion more generally along with issues of poverty and economic inequality.'* (Group discussion, MA students)

*'There are issues of religion, caste, ethnicity, gender and class, so in a densely packed society – how to peel away all of these layers to touch the real problems? You can never get to the root of the problem so when we get to the implementation level we cannot separate these things out.'* (Government official)

# Conclusions and recommendations

## What we have learned

The diverse experiences narrated by our study participants and their perceptions and analyses of changes over time in discriminatory gender norms, attitudes and practices in Nepal suggest that positive changes have indeed occurred over recent generations. As norms around the value of girls and women's rights progress, rising levels of education for girls, expanded economic opportunities for women, increased political voice, and improved SRH services have contributed to empowerment in key capability domains. Nevertheless, it is also clear from our research that significant challenges remain. Cultural norms are 'sticky', particularly around issues to do with marriage and the household, women's relation to property, women's sexuality, and women exercising power in politics and the public sphere.

*'You also need to be stubborn. My mother used to say I was naughty, but now she is proud of me! We should not keep girls in (coddle them or shelter them from challenges) but send them out to make them strong. We have part of God in us and we contribute to our nation.'* (Pioneering mountaineer)

## The way forward

Participants are clear that continued progress requires ongoing, broad-based efforts around social mobilisation and awareness-raising, to try to retain and further the momentum towards equality and inclusion created by the social movements of the 1990s. Further safeguarding of rights in law is needed – particularly around citizenship rights, property, and protection from all forms of violence, as well as much greater attention to the implementation and enactment of laws and policies on the ground.

Gender-equitable socialisation processes must start early – within the family: *'If not, it is like pouring water into a glass that is already full – it will just flow out'* (young woman professional). Individual agency can be nourished and supported and girls' confidence built up so that they believe 'you can do any task that men can do' (business leader).

Enhancement of quality education and equitable expansion of higher educational opportunities for girls are other key priorities. Further education is directly linked with job prospects and without it, girls will be deprived of options for economic empowerment, so the two need to go together. Overall, participants suggested that integrated approaches are critical to moving the gender equality/women's economic empowerment agenda forward, since women's empowerment is a complex whole with intertwining social, economic and political dimensions

And finally, given both the diversity of socio-cultural settings and structures as well as the disparities that mark women's status and development in Nepal, efforts must be based on differentiated, context-specific approaches that start from the bottom-up and take into account women's own voices and priorities for change.

*'The aim is not just to promote economic activities and empowerment but to effect social transformation. You cannot start from economic empowerment only – you have to do everything at the same time – education, protection, leadership skills-training. So it is important to take an integrated approach.'* (Government official)

Participants recognised that the way forward will not be easy because, *'In spite of all of the revolutions, movements, transitions and the Constitution, the concept of "woman" has somehow not changed'* (political leader). The 'patriarchal mind-set' is embedded not only in men, but in women too, and continued struggle is needed, as *'change is difficult to achieve'* (political leader). There is a recognition that *'Cultural norms are strong and will fight back'* (government official) and that *'At every small chance, patriarchy will stick its head up'* (CSO activist). Bringing about and sustaining transformational change will require continued effort, individual and collective agency, and commitment. *'So we always have to keep fighting in spite of all of the practical problems that women face'* (political leader).

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**About ALIGN**

ALIGN is a four-year project aimed at establishing a digital platform for the Community of Practice (CoP) centred on gendered norms affecting adolescents and young adults. Project ALIGN seeks to advance understanding and challenge and change harmful gender norms by connecting a global community of researchers and thought leaders committed to gender justice and equality for adolescents and young adults. Through the sharing of information and the facilitation of mutual learning, ALIGN aims to ensure knowledge on norm change contributes to sustainable gender justice.

**ALIGN's Research Fund**

ALIGN's Research Fund supports small-scale action research or research translation projects which advance knowledge and evidence on gender norms across a wide range of contexts.

**ALIGN Programme Office**

Overseas Development Institute  
203 Blackfriars Road  
London SE1 8NJ  
United Kingdom  
Email: [align@odi.org.uk](mailto:align@odi.org.uk)  
Web: [www.alignplatform.org](http://www.alignplatform.org)

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Front cover: Parents of students of Shreeshitalacom Lower Secondary School, Kaski, Nepal. © Simone D. McCourtie / World Bank

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