# Exploring Gender Equality and Social Inclusion in Rural Education through Compelling Case Studies

## 2023

# Acknowledgement

**Disclaimers**

# Executive Summary

This report is a part of the project "Effectiveness and Scalability of Programs for Children Who Are Out of School and at Risk of Dropping Out in Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal, and the project has been supported by the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), Knowledge & Innovation Exchange (KIX), and International Development Research Center (IDRC). The report contains a series of five case studies that illustrate an in-depth analysis of critical issues affecting the well-being, flourishing, and development of rural students, with a particular focus on gender equality and social inclusion (GESI). By examining the issues through the lens of gender and social dynamics, the report aims to understand how different identities, facilities, access, educational experiences, and backgrounds impact the overall intention of students to either continue or drop out of the school system.

The first case study centers around the contentious issue of gender-segregated sanitation facilities. Inadequate and unequal access to proper sanitation facilities affects female students disproportionately, leading to privacy and safety concerns that can hamper their attendance and overall educational experience. The second case study delves into the harrowing reality of child labor in brick kilns. Poverty and economic struggles drive children from rural communities into hazardous labor practices, often depriving them of the opportunity for education and exposing them to exploitation. Gendered household responsibilities form the focal point of the third case study, as embedded cultural norms and traditions often dictate distinct roles for boys and girls within households. The fourth case study examines the dark specters of corporal punishment and bullying within rural educational institutions. These practices create a hostile learning environment, hampering academic progress and causing emotional distress. Finally, the fifth case study revolves around the topic of personal autonomy for children in rural communities. Respecting the agency of children is critical for nurturing independent thinkers and decision-makers. Yet, in many rural settings, children's voices and choices are stifled, affecting their self-confidence and critical thinking abilities.

## Methods

The research was conducted in Yamunamai Rural Municipality (YRM) and Durga Bhagwati Rural Municipality (DRM) in the Rautahat district of Nepal. Rautahat is situated in the southern part of the country, bordered by Sarlahi district to the east, Bara district to the west, Chitwan district to the north, and the Bihar state of India to the south. The study followed a qualitative research design and used in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and case study analysis as data collection methods. Two field visits took place from March to July 2023. During the first phase (8 May−22 May), 16 FGDs were conducted in 8 schools, with 10 students each in separate groups for boys and girls. In the second phase (16 June−28 June), 600 in-depth interviews were conducted, with an equal distribution of 150 girls and 150 boys from classes 3 to 8 in both YRM and DRM. The case analysis was based on the data collected from these FGDs and in-depth interviews, providing comprehensive insights into the research objective.

## Findings

The case studies offered insights into critical issues affecting rural students. The students' responses demonstrate a favorable and thankful point of view regarding the presence of separate toilet facilities for girl and boy students within their school. The student conveys a sense of gratitude for these separate restrooms, underscoring how they contribute to their comfort and sense of safety. Despite the availability of gender-segregated toilets, the overall sanitation facilities were inadequate. It made the situation difficult, especially for girls managing menstrual hygiene. In addition, the study discovered the existence of child labor that occurs seasonally. Child laborers faced adverse consequences, compromising their health and limiting their education due to family finances.

Similarly, in the case of gendered household responsibilities, the study reveals an imbalanced distribution of household duties between girls and boys, resulting in girls shouldering greater responsibilities. Despite this, girls do not perceive these responsibilities as hindrances to their educational pursuits. Likewise, the findings indicate the occurrence of severe incidents such as corporal punishment by teachers and bullying among students, causing students to develop a reluctance to attend classes due to fear or trauma. Instances of corporal punishment are observed to be evenly distributed between girls and boys. However, the incidence of bullying is more prevalent among girls. Last but not least, the children of YRM and DRM, with regard to their personal autonomy, enjoyed a degree of independence when it came to making minor decisions that affected their daily lives. This might include choices about their daily routines, clothing preferences, or leisure activities. However, for major life choices like education and marriage, external factors like family, societal expectations, and cultural norms often constrained their autonomy. Despite these limitations, the students held the perspective that having their parents involved in making significant decisions for them was not a problem.

## Future Modality

Addressing gender disparities in rural public schools will require a comprehensive approach involving ongoing awareness-raising campaigns and community engagement to challenge traditional gender norms and promote equitable opportunities for all students. Schools and relevant stakeholders must collaborate to secure sustainable funding, prioritize maintenance efforts, and foster a continuous dialogue with the schools and community to ensure inclusiveness and address the unique needs of all students. By taking these steps, rural public schools can create safe and conducive learning environments that actively promote and support gender equality. The future modality emphasizes the necessity of continued efforts and active involvement from all stakeholders to create lasting positive change and a more inclusive educational landscape for students of all genders.

# Acronyms and Abbreviations

| | |
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| *BPfA* | Beijing Platform for Action |
| *CEDAW* | Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women |
| *CRPD* | Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disability |
| *DRM* | Durga Bhagwati Rural Municipality |
| *FGD* | Focus Group Discussion |
| *GESI* | Gender Equality and Social Inclusion |
| *GPEKIX* | Global Partner for Education Knowledge & Innovation Exchange |
| *GoN* | Government of Nepal |
| *GRB* | Gender responsive budgeting |
| *ICPD* | International Conference on Population and Development |
| *IDRC* | International Development Research Center |
| *INGOs* | International Non-Governmental Organizations |
| *KUSoA* | Kathmandu University School of Arts |
| *LGOA* | Local Government Operation Act, 2074 |
| *MoF* | The Ministry of Finance |
| *MoFAGA* | Ministry of Federal Affairs and General Administration |
| *MoWCSC* | Ministry of Women, Children, and Senior Citizen |
| *NGOs* | Non-Governmental Organizations |
| *NPC* | National Planning Commission |
| *PWDs* | People with Disabilities |
| *SDGs* | Sustainable Development Goals |
| *SESP* | School Education Sector Plan |
| *SSDP* | School Sector Development Plan |
| *SSRP* | School Sector Reform Plan |
| *UNESCO* | United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization |
| *UNDP* | United Nations Development Programme |
| *UNSCR* | United Nations Security Council Resolutions |
| *YRM* | Yamunamai Rural Municipality |

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# Introduction

## 1.1  Background

The education system in Nepal is quite progressive, and it has over the years undertaken a variety of reform measures to address issues of gender and inclusiveness. All citizens in Nepal are guaranteed free and compulsory education up to the secondary level under the Interim Constitution of 2007, as well as the right to acquire basic education in their home tongue. Education has been prioritized in the Three-Year Interim Plan (2008–2010) and the National Development Strategy Paper (2009), with a focus on gender and inclusion issues and increased expenditure in the field. Through scholarships and incentives for girls and the excluded, particularly Dalits and Adivasi Janajatis, the Education for All core document makes considerable attempts to increase quality as well as access, equity, efficiency, and enrollment. In order to guarantee gender equality and social inclusion in primary education, the Vulnerable Communities Development Plan (2004) recommended a number of measures at the national and local levels. Unfortunately, these recommendations were never successfully carried out. The School Sector Reform Program (SSRP, 2009–2015), under a sector-wide approach, constitutes a long-term strategic attempt to achieve specific goals in basic and secondary education. Other programs (the School Education Support Program, the Community School Support Program, and the Teacher Education Project) were implemented to cover specific aspects.

Despite improvements in inclusion and measures to widen access to education, social issues such as gender, age, language, and caste connected to geographic location and economic position severely restrict access to a site for some groups of people. Districts in the Tarai region of Nepal have the lowest net and gross enrollment rates, as well as the largest gender gaps in literacy. In general, gender norms such as the belief that sons should be the main breadwinners, the Hindu belief that girls should marry young and, once married, should not contribute to their parents' care, and the sexual vulnerability of girls when living away from home before marriage limit girls' access to education. It is crucial to understand that these obstacles are complex and linked to caste, religion, and linguistic difficulties (Asian Development Bank, 2012). Although the education and literacy levels of Adivasi Janajati groups have significantly grown, they nevertheless remain low in several areas, including some where there are no school-age children.

Moreover, dalit enrolment at the elementary level has increased significantly, but due to work, livelihood issues, inadequate financial support, caste-based prejudice, and

distance from schools and institutions, their continuation to secondary level classes is low (Asian Development Bank, 2012). Despite the constitutional right to education in the mother tongue, language remains a major barrier for Adivasi Janajatis and Madhesis. For those with disabilities, barriers include a lack of friendly physical infrastructure, an inappropriate learning environment, and positive teacher and student attitudes.

From a GESI standpoint, the SSRP's policy of awarding subsidies to schools based on per capita spending is a significant change. This will promote the operation of schools in isolated areas and the enrollment of children from previously marginalized groups. The SSRP has placed a great emphasis on providing all pupils, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, with free services for entrance, textbooks, tuition, and exams. Additionally, it has committed to bolstering and formalizing traditional educational approaches in order to elevate them to the status of first-grade formal education.

As mentioned, Nepal has made significant advancements in the field of education. Especially at the primary level, indicators have improved. A variety of reforms and forward-thinking initiatives that support GESI have been put in place and are actively supporting girls and women, the underprivileged, and those who are left out in accessing the sector's services and benefits. However, a number of problems still impact the excluded, including high gender gaps in household responsibilities and the personal autonomy of girls and boys. Similarly, institutional issues, such as teachers resorting to physical punishment or violence towards students, a lack of hygiene practices, etc., represent a grave concern in educational settings.

## 1.2   Objectives

The objective of this report is to shed light on the persistent issues impacting marginalized groups within educational settings, which are as follows:

- Investigate the availability of gender-segregated sanitation facilities and their impact on female students' attendance and overall educational experience.
- Examine the alarming issue of child labor in brick kilns, exploring the factors driving children from rural communities into hazardous labor practices and their repercussions on their access to education and well-being.
- Analyze the responsibilities of girls and boys within households and how they affect their educational opportunities.
- Investigate the prevalence and consequences of corporal punishment and bullying in rural educational institutions, understanding their adverse effects on academic progress and emotional well-being.
- Analyze the degree to which personal autonomy is afforded to rural children, considering variables including community influence.

# Key GESI concepts and their importance in Education

This chapter includes an exploration of GESI, which is a multifaceted process aimed at promoting equal rights, opportunities, and well-being for vulnerable populations. Also, its importance in education is highlighted, as it ensures equitable access to quality education, fosters inclusive learning environments, empowers students to participate actively, and addresses disparities among different social groups.

## 2.1  What is GESI?

**GESI,** as defined by the United Nations, refers to the equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities of women and men, girls and boys. Gender equality is the state or condition that affords women, girls, and men equal enjoyment of human rights and socially valued goods, opportunities, and resources. It includes expanding freedoms and voice, improving power dynamics and relations, transforming gender roles, and enhancing overall quality of life so that males and females achieve their full potential ("Gender Equality and Social Inclusion: A Priority for Promost, 2021).

Social inclusion seeks to address inequality and/or exclusion of vulnerable populations by improving terms of participation in society and enhancing opportunities, access to resources, voice, and respect for human rights. It seeks to promote empowerment and advance peaceful and inclusive societies and institutions.

Intersectionality is the interplay of multiple social characteristics (such as gender, race, class, disability, marital status, immigration status, geographical location, level of education, religion, and ethnicity) that increases vulnerability and inequality in privilege and power and further entrenches inequalities and injustice. These characteristics are interconnected and cannot be examined separately from one another (Chandler, 2020).

GESI is a multifaceted process of transformation that:

- Promotes equal and inclusive access, decision-making, participation, and well-being for the most vulnerable.
- Transforms systems, social norms, and relations to enable the most vulnerable to participate in and benefit equally from development interventions.
- Builds individual and collective agency, resilience, and action.

- Promotes the empowerment and well-being of vulnerable children, their families, and communities.

## 2.2   What is social inclusion?

Social inclusion is a process that ensures that those at risk of poverty and social exclusion gain the opportunities and resources necessary to participate fully in economic, social, political, and cultural life and to enjoy a standard of living that is considered normal in the society in which they live. It ensures that they have greater participation in decision-making, which affects their lives and access to their fundamental rights (Commission of the European Communities, 2003, p. 9). Social inclusion is the process by which efforts are made to ensure equal opportunities—that everyone, regardless of their background, can achieve their full potential in life. Such efforts include policies and actions that promote equal access to (public) services as well as enable citizens participation in the decision-making processes that affect their lives (United Nations, 2016).

An inclusive society was described as "a society for all," in which "every individual, each with rights and responsibilities, has an active role to play," at the 1995 World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen (United Nations, 1995).

The 2030 Agenda is founded on the idea that everyone should benefit from wealth and live up to minimal standards of wellbeing. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals, which aim to free all people from poverty, encapsulate this. To protect communities, individuals, and all facets of society from hunger and poverty, among other things, by ensuring access to contemporary resources like education, energy, and information. The agenda embraces broad targets aimed at promoting the rule of law, ensuring equal access to justice, and generally fostering inclusive and participatory decision-making, acknowledging that these goals are difficult to achieve without making institutions work for those who are most vulnerable and those who are living in extreme poverty (UNDP).

## 2.3   Why is GESI important for education?

To guarantee that all students have access to school and can attain the desired learning outcomes, GESI must be mainstreamed into the educational system. Boys and girls, children with disabilities, and those from linguistic, ethnic, or religious communities may not have access to the education they require to properly engage in the social, economic, and political life of their neighborhood. GESI are crucial for education because they promote equal opportunities, foster inclusive learning environments, and empower all individuals to reach their full potential. Here are some key reasons why GESI is essential for education:

**Equity and Access**: GESI ensures that all individuals, regardless of their gender, socio-economic status, ethnicity, disability, or other social identities, have equal access to quality education. It helps break down barriers and discriminatory practices that might prevent certain groups from receiving an education.

**Inclusive Learning Environments**: GESI promotes the creation of inclusive and safe learning environments where every student feels valued and respected. By recognizing and accommodating the diverse needs and experiences of students, GESI fosters a sense of belonging and emotional well-being, which enhances the overall learning experience.

**Empowerment and Agency**: GESI empowers individuals to participate actively in the educational process and exercise their agency. It encourages students to express their opinions, engage in decision-making, and shape their educational journey, leading to more motivated and self-directed learners.

**Overcoming Gender Stereotypes**: GESI challenges harmful gender stereotypes that limit the choices and opportunities of both girls and boys. By promoting gender equality, GESI dismantles traditional roles and expectations, allowing all students to pursue their interests and aspirations freely.

**Addressing Disparities**: GESI helps identify and address disparities in educational outcomes among different social groups. It draws attention to the specific challenges faced by marginalized communities, such as girls, children with disabilities, and ethnic minorities, and strives to create targeted interventions to bridge these gaps.

**Enhanced Learning Outcomes:** Inclusive and equitable education leads to improved learning outcomes for all students. When students feel supported and valued, they are more likely to be engaged in their studies and achieve better academic results.

**Social Cohesion and Tolerance:** GESI fosters a culture of understanding, empathy, and respect among students from diverse backgrounds. It encourages dialogue and cooperation, creating the foundation for a more harmonious and tolerant society.

**Sustainable Development:** Education is a powerful catalyst for social and economic development. By ensuring that education is inclusive and equitable, GESI contributes to building a more just, equal, and sustainable society.

# Nepal's Policy Commitments on GESI and Educational

This chapter highlights Nepal's dedicated efforts and strong commitment towards achieving GESI across various sectors. Through its Constitution, national plans, and legislation, Nepal aims to create a more inclusive society where everyone, regardless of their gender, ethnicity, or abilities, can enjoy equal rights and opportunities. The chapter delves into the specific policies and initiatives that have been implemented to promote GESI, with a particular focus on sectors such as education, governance, and budgeting. By exploring organizational setups, gender-responsive budgeting, and international commitments, we can gain a comprehensive understanding of Nepal's progress in fostering a more equitable and diverse society.

## 3.1   National GESI and Educational Commitment

Strong promises to GESI are made in the Constitution, the 14th Three-Year Plan, and the 15th Five-Year Plan. The GESI guidelines are specific to eight sectoral ministries. The Civil Service Amendment Act of 2014 promotes diversity and mandates that 45% of the workforce shall be made up of women (33%), Adivasi Janajatis (27%), Madhesis (22%), Dalits (9%), People with Disabilities (5%), and 4% from "other backward classes. The Local Government Operation Act (LGOA) of 2017 included clauses to support GESI and acknowledge it as a local government function. It demands that planning procedures be participatory and that initiatives that directly benefit women and marginalized groups be acknowledged as supporting GESI. Additionally, in 2017, the Parliament approved the Disability Rights Act, which established constitutional provisions aimed primarily at defending and assisting people with disabilities (PWDs).

According to the Intergovernmental Fiscal Arrangement Act of 2017, the Nepalese government may give grants to state and local governments, including a special grant for the development of a class or group that has experienced economic, social, or other forms of discrimination. 40 The elimination of gender-based violence and harmful practices is a top priority for the Ministry of Women, Children, and Senior Citizens (MOWCSC), which also stresses the economic empowerment of women. For local governments incorporating GESI, the Ministry of Federal Affairs and General Administration has released a number of model acts. Here, 41 local governments have adopted these model laws to create their own policies, rules, and regulations.

The School Sector Reform Plan (SSRP) is a comprehensive plan that was implemented from 2009 to 2015 with the goal of raising the standard, equity, and effectiveness of Nepal's primary education. It focused on issues including school choice, teacher preparation, curriculum development, access to education, infrastructure, and administration. The primary goals of this strategy were to increase access, equity, and quality while expanding free secondary education, advancing equity, and ensuring the relevance of secondary education involvement in every element of secondary education. The program also emphasized creating capable and qualified human resources to satisfy the needs of national growth and lay the groundwork for higher education. Besides, many of its objectives have become integral parts of educational policy in Nepal.

The School Sector Reform Program (SSRP) aimed to accomplish a number of objectives. The country's educational system has to be improved and restructured. These objectives include extending programs for early childhood development (ECD) nationwide, enhancing access to education, and improving participation and retention rates. The SSRP also emphasized determining each student's unique learning requirements and integrating diversity, indigenous culture, and language into the classroom. The use of the mother tongue as a medium of instruction in elementary education is encouraged. The initiative aims to give individuals and children access to non-formal education.

Girls and women from underrepresented groups receive special consideration to ensure their equal participation and fair outcomes. The improvement of the educational environment and procedures is a top priority. The SSRP seeks to increase institutions' ability to carry out reform initiatives successfully. With many streams for vocational education, this plan divides education into basic education (grades one through eight) and secondary education (grades nine through twelve). The program places a strong emphasis on gender equality, inclusive education, and a rights-based approach. Overall, the plan highlights the importance of equity in education and the need for effective and efficient schools to achieve this goal.

Simultaneously, the School Sector Development Strategy (SSDP) is an extensive strategy with the goal of raising educational standards in Nepal. The program strives to give students options and recognize learning pathways between technical and general secondary schools by focusing on the three pillars of access, inclusion, and quality.

Additionally, the strategy intends to improve institutional ties and facilitate the students' entry into higher education while educating them to uphold and carry out their civic responsibilities. The strategy takes into account the vast range of participants' cultures, environments, and requirements, including those of students whose first languages are not English. In order to inform the government's central and decentralized planning and its budgeting procedures on eliminating inequities, the plan operationalizes the Equity Index within the EMIS at all levels. This has ramifications for equity. In order to promote more equitable access to education, the strategy also aims to address the poor competency in Nepali among students whose first language is not Nepali. The strategy attempts to give everyone the same chances and acknowledges the value of educating all children, regardless of their backgrounds.

In line with other education sector plans and policies, the goal of the School Education Sector Plan (SESP) (2022-2032) is to ensure that all children, including those from socially and economically disadvantaged groups and children with disabilities, have equitable access to and participation in a full school education cycle. In addition to adhering to a number of international treaties and declarations linked to the education of women and people with disabilities, the plan acknowledges the complexity of Nepal's context in terms of its geographical, demographic, social, cultural, and economic elements. The plan outlines strategies for achieving equity and inclusion in school education, including free education, scholarships, equity strategies, an inclusive education roadmap, health and nutrition services, improved school environments, and upholding children's rights to education.

## 3.2 Organizational Setups Concerning GESI in Nepal

Organizational setups are charged with making sure that GESI is promoted. The main ministry for advancing women's empowerment and gender equality is the Ministry of Women, Children, and Senior Citizens (MoWCSC). GoN recently endorsed the Gender Equality Policy (2077), developed under the leadership of the MoWCSC. The policy places a high priority on supporting women's economic empowerment, ensuring their meaningful involvement in all facets of society, and getting rid of harmful behaviors and gender-based violence. The Parliament is now considering endorsing the Social Inclusion Policy, which was created under the direction of the Ministry of Federal Affairs and General Administration (MoFAGA). The proposed policy aims to involve excluded and marginalized communities in already-existing mechanisms and development benefits as well as gain access to them. With the help of the Sexual Harassment at Workplace Prevention Act of 2017, everyone can work in a secure environment.

Additionally, it manages programs for young people and seniors, including the elderly and those with impairments. In each district, there are the Women Development Offices, which are overseen by the Department of Women Development under the MoWCSC and carry out the department's initiatives for women and children. Inadequate funding and limited capacity limit effectiveness at all levels—ministry, department, and district. The Social Development Division of the National Planning Commission (NPC) is in charge of handling matters related to women's emancipation. The NPC's Agriculture and Rural Infrastructure Development Division is tasked with promoting social inclusion. All in all, thirty-one programs targeting underprivileged and marginalized groups, including children, the elderly, and individuals with disabilities, have been implemented by the MoWCSC. The inter-ministerial Gender-Responsive Budget Committee was established by the Ministry of Finance (MoF) with the task of developing a mechanism to track sectoral budget allocations and public expenditures from a gender perspective and to evaluate the effects of development programs on women and men.

## 3.3    GESI Responsive Budgeting

The Ministry of Finance (MoF) adopted gender responsive budgeting (GRB) in the fiscal year (FY) 2007–2008, launching the three categories of (i) directly gender responsive with a 50% allocation, (ii) indirectly gender responsive with a 20–25% allocation, and (iii) neutral with less than 20% directly benefiting women.

The first one implies that more than 50% of the budgeted amount goes directly to helping women; the second one, between 20% and 50%; and the third, less than 20%. Classification must be done using the provided quantitative indicators. A Gender Responsive Budget Committee has been established with the goals of evaluating public expenditure from a gender perspective, monitoring patterns of budget allocation and implementation to make the budget gender responsive, routinely analyzing the impact of economic policies on women and incorporating the results in an economic survey, and strengthening the capacity of gender focal points and planning divisions of sectoral ministries responsible to provide feedback to the government for budgeting and to disseminate information on GRB in order to make the budget gender sensitive.

## 3.4    International Commitment

Nepal has ratified 23 international human rights instruments, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the Beijing Platform for Action, UN Security Council Resolutions (UNSCR), the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the International Labour Organization, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, and the Welfare and Rights of PWDs (Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disability [CRPD]). Nepal has endorsed the SDGs as well.

Nepal is required to advance legal, economic, social, political, civic, and constitutional equality under these international agreements and commitments. UNSCR 1325 demands that women participate equally in all decision-making roles in a post-conflict setting as well as the peace process. The government supported International Labour Organization Convention No. 169 in 2007, which advances Janajatis' rights. The CRPD also stipulates rules for eliminating all forms of prejudice against PWDs. Similar to this, many other international agreements, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Education for All, and the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) on reproductive health, have demanded that Nepal commit to achieving the goals of gender equality and women's empowerment (SDG 5) and reducing inequalities (SDG 10). As a result, Nepal has a supportive policy environment, but it still faces challenges in terms of effective implementation, achieving gender equality, and bringing about inclusive changes.

# Methodology

The field study conducted for the purpose of this research took place in YRM and DRM, both situated in the Rautahat district of Nepal. Rautahat is located in the southern part of the country, bordered by Sarlahi district to the east, Bara district to the west, Chitwan district to the north, and the Indian state of Bihar to the south. It is part of the Madhesh province, one of the seventy-seven districts of Nepal, with its district headquarters in Gaur. The district covers an area of 1,126 square kilometers and, according to the 2021 census, has a total population of 813,573, comprising 408,403 males and 405,170 females. It is the district with the lowest literacy rate (42% in the country); only half of men and a third of women are literate in Rautahat (Nepal Times, 2019).
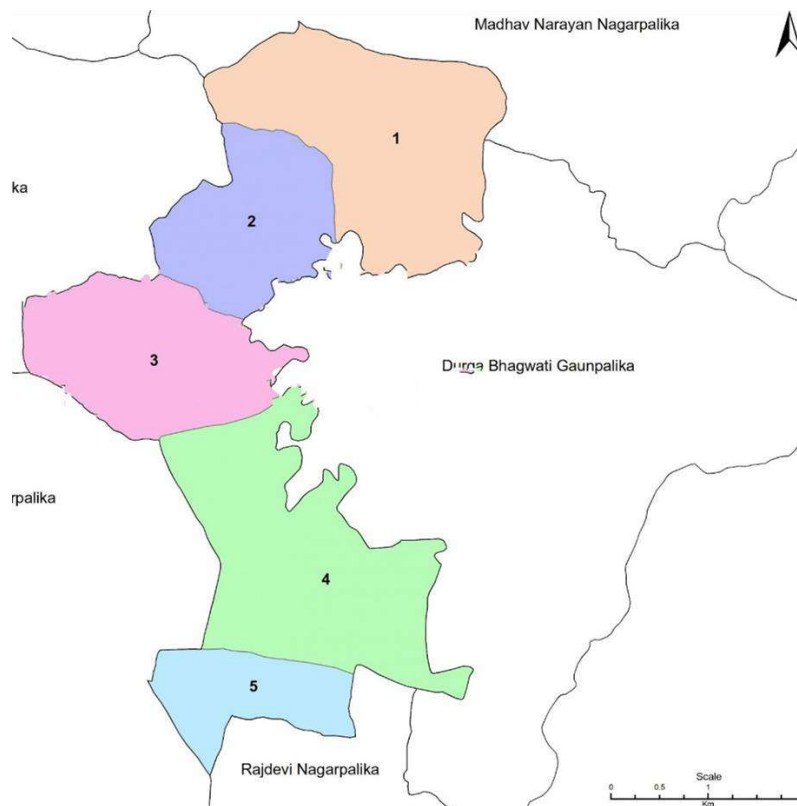


Map of Yamunamai Rural Municipality
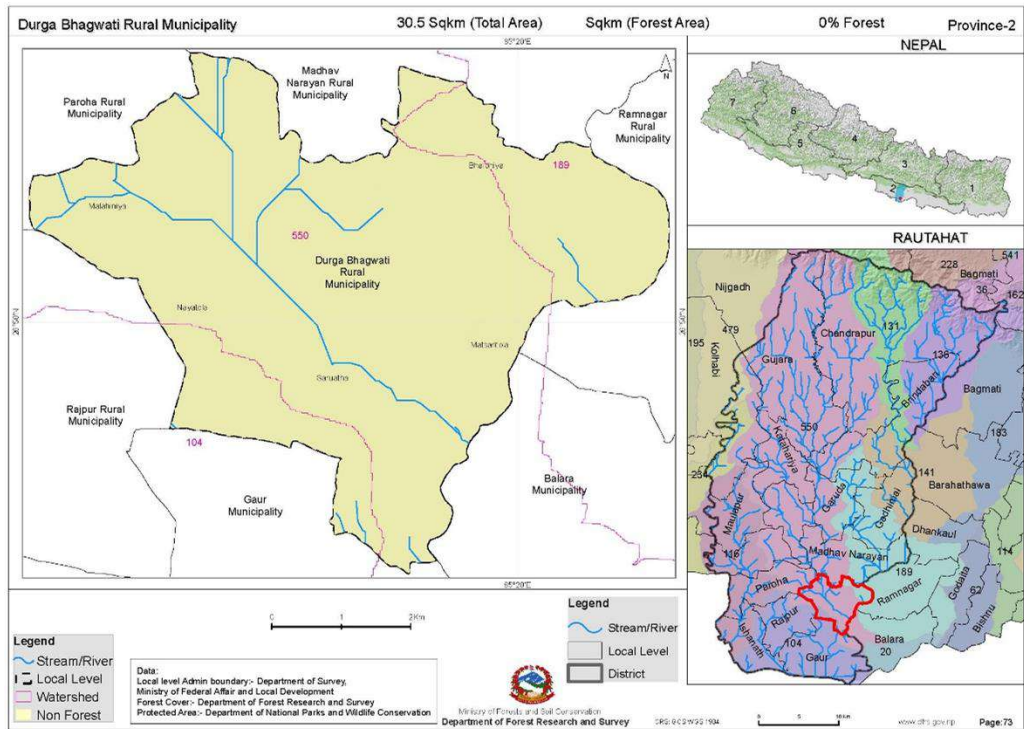
Map of Durga Bhagwati Rural Municipality

*Source: Local Resource Map*

The study followed a qualitative research design and employed three main data collection methods: in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and case study analysis. This combination of data collection techniques allowed for a comprehensive exploration and understanding of the research objective, providing in-depth insights into the participants' perspectives and experiences.

The study was carried out over a rigorous and defined period of five months, encompassing the months from March to July 2023. The research involved two crucial field visits to the study site, which provided invaluable opportunities for data collection and conducting observations. The first field visit was conducted from May 8 to May 22, 2023. During the first phase of the study, FGD was employed as a primary data collection method. The FGDs were conducted in a total of 8 schools, and each school had two FGDs, one with a group of boys and the other with a group of girls. Thus, there were a total of 16 focus groups, 8 for boys and 8 for girls. Each focus group consisted of 10 students, resulting in a diverse and representative sample of the student population.

The second field visit occurred from June 16 to June 28. During the second phase of the study, in-depth interviews were conducted. In total, 600 respondents were interviewed for this study. Among them, 300 respondents were from DRM, consisting of an equal distribution of 150 girls and 150 boys from classes 3 to 8. Additionally, 300 respondents were from YRM, comprising 150 girls and 150 boys from the same grade range. The case analysis was made from the data collected during the FGDs and in-depth interviews.

Conducting a Focus Group Discussion with girls of rural public schools, Rautahat

*Source: Field Survey, 2023*



Conducting One-on-one Interview with the students, Rautahat

*Source: Field Survey, 2023*

The research team ensured that ethical considerations were upheld throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained from the participants and their guardians, ensuring they were aware of the study's purpose and that their identities would remain confidential. In order to protect the privacy and safety of the individuals involved, the respondent's name has been changed for their statement. It is essential to prioritize the security and confidentiality of all parties involved in sensitive matters. By using a pseudonym, we aim to ensure that the focus remains on addressing the issue at hand and fostering a supportive environment for the students and their families.

# Exploring GESI cases among students in diverse contexts

This chapter delves into the multifaceted challenges that impact marginalized communities access to quality education. Through five comprehensive case studies, the chapter examines critical issues that hinder inclusivity and equitable opportunities in educational settings:

## 5.1   Separate toilets for girls and boys: A Case Study on Gender-Segregated Sanitation Facilities

The objective of this case study is to examine the implementation and impact of separate toilets for girls and boys in rural public schools. By focusing on gender-segregated sanitation facilities, the study aims to understand the implications for gender equality, personal hygiene, and the overall well-being of students. Through an in-depth analysis of this practice, the study seeks to provide insights into its effectiveness, challenges, and potential improvements, with the ultimate goal of promoting inclusive and equitable sanitation solutions in rural educational settings.

**Availability of gender-segregated toilet facilities:** As per quantitative data, 88.2% of the students responded that the schools had gender-segregated toilets. This indicates that efforts have been made to address the privacy and safety concerns of students, particularly girls, which can positively impact attendance and the overall educational experience. However, 11.8% of students still reported the unavailability of such facilities. This underscores the need for continued efforts to ensure that all schools provide gender-segregated toilets to create a more inclusive and supportive learning environment. Furthermore, despite the relatively high percentage of availability, 22.3% of the students expressed dissatisfaction with the gender-segregated toilets. This suggests that there may be room for improvement in the quality, maintenance, or accessibility of these facilities to better meet the students' needs and expectations.

Regarding toilet facilities Aanuska, a 15-year-old girl currently studying in the 8th grade, says "*I and my friends feel much more comfortable coming to school now*".

The students of public schools of Durgabhagwati Rural Municipality, Rautahat

*Source: Field Survey, 2023*

Likewise, Seema, a 16-years-old girl of grade 7 says, *"Gender-segregated sanitation facilities have been a transformative induction for our school. Before, using shared bathrooms often made some of us uncomfortable and self-conscious. Now that we have separate facilities, we feel more secure and at ease".*

Anju, a 15-years old girl of grade 6: *"I'm really grateful that our school has separate toilets for girls and boys. It makes me feel more comfortable and secure knowing I have my own space. It's important to have that privacy, especially during our time of the month."*

The student's response reflects a positive and appreciative perspective regarding the availability of separate toilets for girls and boys in their school. The student expresses feeling grateful for the separate toilets, emphasizing that they make them feel more comfortable and secure. This sentiment suggests that the provision of gender-segregated facilities has a positive impact on the students' overall well-being and sense of safety at school. The student specifically mentions the importance of privacy, especially during their menstrual cycle. This highlights a critical aspect of gender-segregated toilets, as separate facilities offer girls the space and privacy, they need to manage personal hygiene during menstruation without feeling exposed or uncomfortable.

On the other hand, in schools without separate toilets, girls often missed classes during menstruation, leading to absenteeism and reduced educational opportunities. Nisha, a 15-year-old in grade 6, says, *"It's frustrating that the lack of separate toilets in my school makes me feel compelled to stay at home during certain times, like menstruation, or go home in the middle of the classes. It's embarrassing and uncomfortable to use shared facilities, and it affects our overall well-being".*

Likewise, Dimple, a 13-year-old girl in grade 4, says, *"I used to miss classes during my periods because we don't have separate toilets at school. It's embarrassing and uncomfortable to use the same restrooms as boys during that time. I wish we had separate facilities so that I wouldn't have to worry about missing out on my education."*



Availability of separate toilets in public schools of Yamunamai Rural Municipality and Durgabhagwati Rural Municipality, Rautahat

*Source: Field Survey, 2023*

**Hygiene Practices:** Students were aware of the hygiene practices, such as washing hands, but due to lack of availability of well-maintained sanitation facilities, students would not demonstrate such practices. Data shows 37.2% of the schools had no hygiene facilities such as water, soap or dust bins in the toilets. According to Amir, a 12-years-old studying in grade 3, *"After using toilets we wash our hands with mud"*. S

Similarly, Isha, a 16-years old of grade 8 indicates, *"there is no soap for us to wash hands after using the toilet"*. The girl students also mentioned that there were no dust bins in the toilet to dispense the used sanitary pads. They said, *"The condition of the toilets is terrible. There are no dustbins so we throw the used sanitary napkins in one of the corners of the school premises. The doors are broken, and the plumbing doesn't work properly. It's gross and uncomfortable to use them. I wish the school would prioritize maintenance to provide us with clean and functional facilities."* In addition, Mohhamad, 14-years-old of grade 6 says, *"We don't have doors in toilets which makes us uncomfortable while using it"*. *"The toilets smell bad, and the condition is terrible. It's not a pleasant environment, and I often try to avoid using them if possible. I wish the school would take our concerns seriously and improve the maintenance."* Likewise, 39.8% of the students were unsatisfied with schools' lack of hygiene facilities.

Situation of toilets in one of the public schools of Durgabhagwati Rural Municipality, Rautahat

*Source: Field Survey, 2023*

**Challenges of Maintenance:** Schools faced challenges in ensuring regular maintenance and repairs of separate toilets due to limited resources and technical expertise. A school staff says, *"One of the major challenges of maintenance is the limited budget allocated for upkeep. With tight financial resources, it becomes challenging to carry out regular repairs and renovations, leading to deteriorating infrastructure."*

According to the teachers, different International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) build the toilets but due to lack of funds it is difficult to maintain its sustainability. Schools face challenges which include irregular cleaning schedules, lack of cleaning supplies and equipment, and lack of maintenance personnel.

## 5.2 Examining Child Labor in Brick Kilns: A Case Study of Rautahat's Public School

This case study delves into the prevalent issue of child labor in brick kilns, with a particular focus on Rautahat's public school area. The study aims to understand the extent and underlying factors that contribute to child labor in this region. Additionally, it examines the issue through the lens of GESI to identify any unique challenges faced by vulnerable groups, particularly girls and marginalized communities.

The findings of the study revealed a prevalence of child labor among both boys and girls in the brick kilns of rural municipalities in Rautahat. However, safety concerns made the situation for girls more vulnerable. Several socio-economic factors, such as limited access to education, lack of awareness, and poverty, were identified as the root causes of child labor. Children missed school for weeks and months, which affected their academic performances.

Sahara, a 16-year-old girl in grade 7, says, *"I work in the brick kiln during certain times of the year. I feel uneasy about the situation because the majority of the workers there are male, which raises concerns about potential harassment. I sometimes experience teasing, and I don't like it when they treat me that way"*. The brick kiln industry appears to have a significant gender disparity, with the majority of workers being male. This gender imbalance can create a power dynamic that may lead to potential harassment or feelings of vulnerability for female workers. The individual's concerns about potential harassment are valid and highlight the need for a safe and respectful work environment for all employees.

The majority of school-enrolled child laborers in the study region typically began working in the brick kilns in June and continued until July (depending on the weather). For instance, Hemant, a 15-year-old boy respondent, stated: *"We work here about a month on average per year and miss our classes for about 25 days. We typically work in the month of June because it is when the brick kilns demand a lot of workers"*.

Similarly, the parents of child laborers lacked the importance of education and encouraged their children to be involved in income-generating activities from a very young age. For instance, a child laborer, Bikram, aged 14 years old, says, *"I work in brick kilns to help divide the workload with my mother. My mother takes me with her to the brick kilns. The work is grueling, and the scorching heat makes it unbearable. I go to brick kilns during peak demand for the workers. During that season of the year, I miss my school for months' '*.

The study findings indicate that child laborers in Rautahat are paid significantly less compared to adult workers. Child laborers often face exploitation and unfair treatment when it comes to wages, which can have detrimental effects on their well-being and future prospects. Manusha, a 13-year-old girl child laborer, says: *"I was forced to work in the brick kilns due to the poor financial background of my family. I work long hours and get paid very little. I earn 50 rupees a day, which I give to my mother, whereas my mother gets 700 rupees per day. My hands ache after carrying heavy loads. I want to escape this life and study hard. Education can give me a chance for a better future"*. She further says, *"I want to marry when I reach the age of 15"*. The GESI lens reveals a concerning link between child labor in brick kilns and early marriages for girls. Engaging in labor from a young age can increase the likelihood of early marriage, further restricting their choices and opportunities.

The response provides a glimpse into the difficult circumstances faced by children engaged in seasonal child labor at brick kilns. The child's awareness of the importance of education and their desire to attend school regularly reveal their resilience and determination to better their lives through learning.

As the principal of the school (Nayankamakshya Pra Vi), it is disheartening to observe that some parents choose to send their children to work in brick kilns despite not being financially poor. This situation reflects a disparity between their financial stability and their mentality regarding child labor. It is important for us to address this issue and promote a more holistic understanding of child development and education. She says, Parents *send their children to work in brick kilns. They are not financially poor, but their mentality is poor. Most of the students who go for seasonal child labor belong to parents whose fathers are in foreign employment, such as in Malaysia. I go and talk to community people every week to make them aware of the importance of education, but that did not stop parents from sending their children to brick kilns."*

## 5.3 Gendered household responsibilities among students attending rural public schools in Rautahat

Gendered household responsibilities continue to play a significant role in shaping the lives of students attending rural public schools in Rautahat. In many rural communities, traditional gender roles dictate distinct roles and expectations for boys and girls within households. These gender norms influence the division of labor, with girls often shouldering domestic tasks and caregiving responsibilities, while boys are assigned duties outside the home. Consequently, these gendered household responsibilities can have profound effects on the students' educational experiences, overall well-being, and prospects for the future. The study's findings show how gendered household responsibilities shape the educational experiences and outcomes of students attending rural public schools in Rautahat.

**Unequal Division of Household Responsibilities**: The case study revealed a significant gender disparity in the distribution of household tasks among the students attending rural public schools in Rautahat. Girls were found to have a higher burden of domestic chores, including cooking, cleaning, and caring for younger siblings, compared to their male friends. On the other hand, the activities listed on the male student's timetable appeared to focus more on academics and recreational activities. These activities included studying, sleeping, daily commutes, playing on mobile phones, roaming around with friends, attending school and tuition classes, etc. This suggested that boys in the community have more freedom and leisure time to engage in activities that are not predominantly tied to household chores.
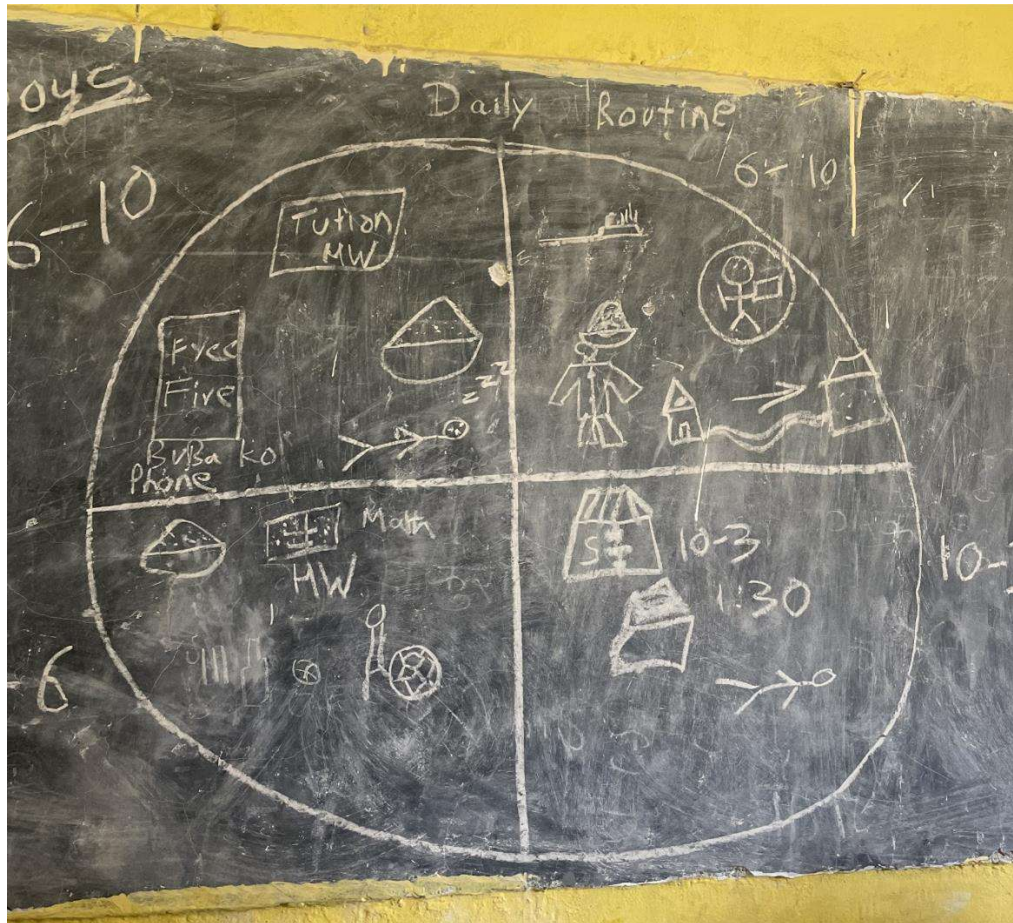
The image is crafted by the boy students themselves vividly illustrates their daily household routines at home.

Hikmat, a 14- years old boy of grade 5 speaks: *"Boys in our community are expected to help with outdoor tasks such as farming, fetching water, and repairing household items. My parents encourage me to work outdoors and say that boys are meant for working outside home"*.

These outdoor tasks hold significant cultural importance in our community, rooted in traditions that have been passed down through generations. Boys are taught from a young age that their participation in these activities is essential for the well-being and sustenance of their families and communities.

The division of labor based on gender is deeply embedded in our cultural practices, reflecting specific roles and responsibilities for boys and girls. While these practices may vary in different communities, they serve to maintain a sense of community cohesion and shared responsibility.

Interviewer collecting in-depth data from the student.

On this issue Kushal, a 12-year-old boy in grade 4, say, "*I spend most of the time in the house playing with friends, watching television, playing games on my mobile phone, and sleeping. While my elder sister does most of the household activities. But when it comes to doing homework or studying, we come together and study*".

While the arrangement of having one sibling primarily handle household tasks and the other focus on leisure activities may seem functional, it also raises concerns about gender norms and the unequal distribution of responsibilities. This division may inadvertently perpetuate traditional gender roles, where household duties are typically associated with females while other activities are seen as more suitable for males.

Pankaj, a 17-year-old in grade 8, says, "*The unequal division of household responsibilities can create a cycle of limited educational attainment for girls, as they struggle to balance schoolwork and domestic duties. This can lead to decreased confidence and self-esteem, impacting their belief in their academic abilities. My elder sister handled all the household chores, as my parents are laborers. She used to cook food for everyone in the house before and after school. She used to perform badly in the exams and always said that studying was not her thing.*

Unequal household responsibilities can have a profound impact on girls' educational opportunities. Being tasked with significant domestic duties leaves less time and energy for academic pursuits. As a result, girls may struggle to complete homework, study for exams, or engage in extracurricular activities. The unequal division of household tasks can lead to a cycle of limited educational attainment for girls, hindering their ability to excel academically and fulfill their potential.

**Impact on Academic Engagement:** Although there was an unequal division of household responsibilities, it did not have a negative impact on female students' academic engagement. The excessive workload and time spent on domestic tasks did not limit their ability to participate in school activities, complete homework, and study

for exams. Girls say, *"We have in-built this concept of unequal division of household responsibilities and balance our daily activities accordingly. We allocate certain time for home work and studies and don't let it affect our academic performance*

Kareena, a 15-year-old girl in grade 6, said, *"In our household, girls are primarily responsible for cooking, cleaning, and looking after younger siblings. These tasks often consume a significant portion of our time, but we are habituated to them and don't feel any burden. However, it feels unfair at times, as our brothers have more freedom to focus on their education".*

The image, crafted by the girl students themselves, vividly illustrates their daily household routines at home.

Likewise, Mustafa, a 14-year-old girl in grade 5, said, *"Gendered division of household responsibilities often places a disproportionate burden on girls, limiting our time and energy for educational pursuits. This unequal distribution of tasks can hinder our academic progress and overall well-being. However, I manage to at least pass my exams by studying for an hour a day. After finishing all the household chores, I study at night before going to bed".*

The analysis of the provided statement highlights the gendered division of household responsibilities and its impact on educational opportunities for girls. While the

individuals in the household may not perceive their tasks as burdensome due to habituation, the feeling of unfairness signals the need to address deeply rooted gender norms and inequalities.

Jyoti, a 16-year-old girl in grade 7, said, *"Although both boys and girls in our community have household responsibilities, there is a noticeable disparity in the types of tasks assigned. Boys are more involved in activities outside the hole, while girls are confined to domestic chores"*.

The provided statement highlights an observable disparity in the types of household responsibilities assigned to boys and girls in the community. While both genders have household responsibilities, the nature of these tasks differs significantly. Boys are more involved in activities outside the home, while girls are primarily confined to domestic chores.

## 5.4   Addressing the unseen treat: A Case Study on Corporal Punishment and Bullying in School Settings

Corporal punishment and bullying remain controversial and prevalent issues in many school settings, impacting the educational experiences and well-being of students worldwide. While gender disparities are often observed in various aspects of education, this study focuses on the alarming finding that both girls and boys receive corporal punishment equally in schools. The study shows the prevalence of corporal punishment by teachers in a significant number of rural public schools. It was found that a considerable portion of teachers relied on physical punishment as a disciplinary method.

Students who are subjected to corporal punishment experience various negative impacts. These included physical injuries, increased aggression, fear, and negative emotional well-being. The use of corporal punishment also strained the teacher-student relationship and hindered the learning environment. Similarly, there were cases of bullying among friends in a significant number of schools. 16% of students in public schools in YRM and DRM experienced bullying. Students experiencing bullying reported emotional distress and a sense of betrayal.

Aakash says, *"I am a student of class 7. I am 14 years old. I was bitten by my teacher until I got injured. It was a terrifying experience. It not only causes physical pain but also affects me emotionally. It made me feel unsafe and violated. From that day on, I didn't feel like going in front of that teacher. I don't like attending his class"*.

Here, the analysis of the student's statement reveals a distressing incident of physical abuse perpetrated by their teacher, and as a result of this incident, the student has suffered both physical and emotional harm. The emotional fear resulting from the incident has had a significant impact on the student's sense of safety and academic engagement.

Kriti says, *"I study in class 8. I am 15 years old. My experience with corporal punishment at school has been traumatizing. I was punished by my teacher for not doing my*

*homework. The stick had some sharp objects on it, which caused me a physical injury in my hand. This experience has made me feel scared, humiliated, and unsafe in the school environment. I find it difficult to concentrate in his class due to my constant fear of punishment.*

As indicated by the expressions of the student, surely the incident of being bitten by the teacher with a stick containing a sharp object goes beyond the traditional norms of corporal punishment. It constitutes a severe act of physical abuse and a violation of the student's rights.

While the prevalence of corporal punishment is meted out to both girls and boys with equal frequency. However, it also revealed that bullying was observed to be more prevalent among girls.

Priya says, "*I am 12 years old, and I study in class 4. I have been a victim of bullying for the past few months. Boys in our school, especially in my class, bully me. There have been instances where I have been pushed, name-called, shoved, and even punched. They also bully me verbally. This makes me feel isolated and powerless. I feel alone and lonely at school. Due to these kinds of acts by others, I don't feel like coming to school and feel safe staying at home. I believe it is crucial for schools to take bullying seriously so that everyone feels safe and wants to come to school*".

Bullying has had a profound emotional impact on the girls lives. They express feelings of isolation, powerlessness, loneliness, and fear. The emotional distress caused by bullying can significantly affect a student's self-esteem, mental well-being, and overall academic performance. The student describes experiencing various forms of bullying, including physical aggression (pushing, shoving, and punching), verbal abuse (name-calling), and social isolation. This indicates a pattern of sustained and harmful mistreatment by her male peers.

Rashmi, a 14-year-old girl in grade 6, says, "*I used to love coming to school, but now I dread it every day. The bullying has made me feel so isolated and alone. I don't understand why they target me, and it's hard to focus on my studies when I'm constantly worried about what they might do next*.

The student's previous positive attitude towards school has been replaced with fear and anxiety. The constant worry about potential bullying incidents has made her dread going to school, which can negatively impact her overall academic performance and motivation.

School bullying is such a common occurrence in schools that, in most cases, it is taken without serious consideration, not only by the perpetrators but sometimes even by the school management. Many school authorities try to cover up school bullying incidents for fear of tarnishing the school's 'image'. While visiting the schools, one of the teachers says, "*All our students are well behaved, and they don't bully anyone. They respect all their friends, play together, and help each other*".

*Bullying incidents can scar victims for life. Bullying may start in a seemingly innocuous manner, with nicknames like Kali, Moti, or Dalli used with no intent of real harm, but things can escalate quickly, and victims may not want to go to school to escape the bullying,*" said the teacher.

## 5.5 Rural students' experiences of personal autonomy: a case study of public schools

In rural areas, students' experiences of personal autonomy in public schools play a crucial role in shaping their overall development and educational outcomes. Personal autonomy refers to the capacity of individuals to make independent decisions, exercise self-direction, and take responsibility for their actions and choices.

The study indicates that while students may enjoy a certain level of autonomy in minor decision-making, such as participation in classroom discussions, clothing preferences, or hobbies, their autonomy is often constrained when it comes to major decision-making, such as choices related to education or marriage. Importantly, this pattern was observed across both girls and boys, suggesting that gender is not the sole determinant of this constraint on personal agency. The norms, cultural traditions, and family expectations of students often restrict their autonomy, particularly in matters related to marriage.

One prominent area where students were observed exercising their autonomy in the case studies conducted in Rautahat was students' participation and engagement in classroom discussions. The findings show that 85% of the students participated in classroom discussions, and only 15% didn't necessarily take part in the classroom discussions. The findings revealed that when students actively contribute to classroom discussions, they demonstrate a greater sense of ownership over their learning and are able to exercise their autonomy in shaping their educational experiences. These participatory environments allowed students to have a voice and fostered their sense of ownership over their learning.

Dilip, a 16-year-old boy in seventh grade, said, *"I often participate in classroom discussions. I appreciate the opportunity to participate in it. It allows me to share my thoughts and perspectives on the topics we are learning. I feel more involved in my own learning process'.*

Aatifa, a 12-year-old girl, stated, *"I used to be shy and hesitate to speak in the classroom, but being encouraged to participate in discussions has really helped me gain confidence. Now, I feel more comfortable expressing my ideas and engaging with my friends. It has made the learning experience more enjoyable for me. It also enhanced my communication skills. Now, I can express my thoughts clearly and listen actively to others".*

Shilpa, a 14-year-old girl, said, *"I appreciate how our teacher creates a supportive environment where everyone's voice is heard. Our teacher encourages us to speak up and share our opinions without fear of judgment. Classroom discussions give us a chance to explore topics in more depth".*

The responses show the positive impact of student participation in classroom discussions, as students express their enjoyment, appreciation for diverse perspectives, deepened understanding, improved communication skills, and increased

confidence. It shows the importance of cultivating an environment that values student autonomy and promotes active engagement in the learning process.

Ritu, a 15-year-old girl, says, *"I have control over my own life when it comes to choosing clothes, going to friends' houses, studying, and eating. However, I am not allowed to say no to marriage at the age of 20, when my parents finalize a marriage for me. I wish I had more autonomy in major decisions like marriage. It's frustrating when those decisions are made for me based on societal expectations or family traditions".*

Rakesh, a 14-year-old boy, says, *"My parents allow me to go out with friends, stay home when I refuse to go to school, or don't contribute to household chores. But when I reach the age of 22, I cannot deny that they have selected me as a girl for marriage. My elder brother's marriage was also fixed by my parents when he was 23 years old".*

Maya, a 16-year-old girl, said, *"I am allowed to play, sleep, and select clothes as per my interest. However, in the case of marriage, my parents will find a good boy who will probably come from a good financial background and send me to his home. I will not deny their decision because it will hurt their emotions. My elder sister denied their decision and eloped with another boy. I have witnessed the challenges my parents faced then. They often had to endure hearing bad comments from the community and relatives. It's already been 2 years, but she is not yet allowed to enter the house".*

Students' autonomy in minor decision-making allowed them to express their preferences, explore their interests, and make choices within the boundaries set by their families. The students enjoyed a degree of independence when it came to making minor decisions that affected their daily lives. This might include choices about their daily routines, clothing preferences, or leisure activities. These decisions, although relatively less impactful in the long term, provide students with opportunities to exercise independence and develop decision-making skills.

However, when it came to major decisions such as their educational path, marriage, etc., students often faced external influences that restricted their autonomy.

According to the data, 66.3% of the students said that they are not allowed to make major life decisions. Family, societal expectations, and cultural traditions played a significant role in shaping these decisions. Decisions related to marriage are made by parents or other family members on their behalf. Factors such as caste, socioeconomic status, and family reputation heavily influenced these major decisions, leaving students with little autonomy to make choices aligned with their individual desires and aspirations. Despite these limitations, the students held the perspective that having their parents involved in making significant decisions for them was not a problem. They appeared to value their parents' guidance and experience in matters that carried long-term implications. This viewpoint could stem from a sense of trust in their parents' wisdom and concern for their well-being. It's possible that the students recognized the complexity of major decisions and appreciated having a support system to rely on as they navigated these critical choices.

# Conclusion

The five case studies presented in this report have provided valuable insights into the critical issues affecting the well-being and development of rural students, with a specific focus on gender equality and social inclusion. The report has presented the complexities of students' educational experiences and the varied impacts of their identities and backgrounds. The quantitative data collected on gender-segregated toilets in schools provides valuable insights into the current state of sanitation facilities for students. It is encouraging to note that a significant majority, 88.2% of the students, reported that their schools had gender-segregated toilets. However, it is essential to acknowledge that 11.8% of students still reported the unavailability of such facilities. Furthermore, despite the relatively high percentage of availability, 22.3% of the students expressed dissatisfaction with the gender-segregated toilets. This suggests that there may be room for improvement in the quality, maintenance, or accessibility of these facilities to better meet the students' needs and expectations.

In moving forward, child laborers acknowledged throughout interviews and focus group discussions that their family's financial position and parental support were crucial factors in determining whether they were able to continue their education or employment. The child laborers faced adverse consequences, including compromised physical and mental health, limited educational opportunities, and exposure to hazardous working conditions.

Similarly, the study reflected how girls are often burdened with domestic tasks and caregiving responsibilities from a young age, especially in rural settings. This disparity could have impacted the educational experience of female students, as they may have limited time and commitment to engage in other activities. However, it is noteworthy that despite these challenges, the majority of the female students interviewed expressed that they did not feel burdened by their assigned duties. There is a positive outlook and support from their families that contribute to their ability to focus on their studies. Likewise, corporal punishment and bullying are detrimental to students' physical and mental well-being, hindering their educational progress and overall development. The cases involving students' underscore the urgent need for schools to address these issues proactively.

Last but not least, the research reveals that students' autonomy is limited in major decision-making, including education and marriage choices, despite experiencing some level of freedom in minor decisions. This constraint on personal agency affects both girls and boys, indicating that gender alone does not determine these limitations. The influence of norms, cultural traditions, and family expectations plays a significant role in restricting students' autonomy, particularly concerning matters related to marriage.

Understanding and addressing these gender dynamics among young students is crucial to promoting inclusive education, breaking stereotypes, and enhancing students' capabilities. Addressing these gender disparities requires a comprehensive approach involving awareness-raising campaigns and community engagement to challenge traditional gender norms and promote equitable opportunities for all students. The schools and relevant stakeholders must collaborate to secure sustainable funding, prioritize maintenance, and engage the community in dialogue to foster inclusiveness and address the unique needs of all students. By doing so, rural public schools can create safe and conducive learning environments that promote gender equality.

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