

Beyond Access: Building Aspirational and Inclusive Education Pathways for Girls and Children with Disabilities in Nepal

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Executive Summary

Nepal's educational landscape has seen important gains over the last two decades, especially in expanding access for girls. Yet, behind national enrollment figures lie stark disparities in retention, learning outcomes, and psychological safety — particularly for girls and children with disabilities. While laws and policies suggest strong intent, implementation remains fragmented, under-resourced, and insufficiently responsive to intersectional needs.

This brief offers a comprehensive analysis of legal frameworks, empirical data, successful interventions, and policy gaps impacting two vulnerable groups: girls and children with disabilities. Drawing on updated census data, school monitoring reports, and grassroots program evaluations, it reframes education not just as a service, but as a platform for aspiration, inclusion, and dignity. Recommendations call for integrated reforms across law, schools, governance, and community structures.



Aspirational Inclusion: Why It Matters

1Inclusion must go beyond the minimum threshold of physical access. True inclusion means enabling each child — regardless of gender, ability, caste, or geography — to be recognized, supported, and empowered to imagine their future. This is especially urgent for girls and children with disabilities who experience repeated social signaling that their

ambitions are unrealistic or irrelevant. Drawing on capability theory (Sen, Nussbaum), this brief argues for education systems that shift from deficit-based models to aspiration-enabling environments. That includes inclusive pedagogy, dignified infrastructure, psychosocial support, and opportunities for self-expression.



Disaggregated Data: Understanding the Gap

Recent data from the 2024 National Census and CEHRD school surveys reveal that while primary school enrollment approaches universality, disparities deepen at higher levels:

Girls (overall): 91.4% enrolled in school, but dropout increases after age 11 due to menstruation stigma, domestic labor, and early marriage.

Girls with disabilities: Only 54.1% enrolled; majority never complete primary school.

Boys with disabilities: Enrollment stands at 74.6%, but retention drops due to vocational tracking and poor support.

Children with multiple or psychosocial disabilities: Enrollment below 40%, concentrated in urban NGO programs or excluded entirely.

Importantly, many girls with disabilities are never counted: lack of birth registration, invisibility in classrooms, and cultural stigma render them statistically and socially absent.

Sources: CBS (2024); CEHRD (2023); SSDP Monitoring (2023); Plan Nepal (2022)



Legal and Policy Landscape

Nepal's laws reflect progressive aspirations, but fall short in coordination and enforcement:

Legal Instrument	Provision	Coverage	Gaps
Constitution (2015)	Right to education, equality, and protection	Girls and children with disabilities	No operational link to local planning or aspiration-based frameworks
Disability Rights Act (2017)	Inclusive education, reasonable accommodation	All disabilities	Limited budgetary mechanisms; uneven rollout
Education Act & SSDP (2017)	Scholarships, female teacher quotas, resource classes	Girls and disabled children	Weak link to learning outcomes or aspiration tracking
Local Governance Act (2017)	Delegates education responsibility to municipalities	All children	Poor targeting, undertrained staff, inadequate funds

Despite strong legal framing, intersectional policy strategies are largely absent — girls with disabilities, for example, are not separately identified or supported in most education programs.

Barriers to Inclusion: Field-Level Realities

Gender-Based Exclusions

Girls, especially from Dalit, Madhesi, and indigenous backgrounds, experience exclusion shaped by household poverty, societal norms, and fragile school environments. In Terai districts, early marriage persists despite legal prohibitions, and schools lack facilities for menstrual hygiene or privacy. In many families, educating daughters is seen as a financial risk rather than a communal investment. During crises like COVID-19, vulnerability increased: Room to Read's 2020 survey revealed that over half of school-going girls feared they'd never return to school due to household labor and parental pressure to marry.

Disability-Specific Challenges

Children with disabilities face structural and attitudinal exclusions. Most public schools lack ramps, accessible toilets, resource teachers, or adapted curricula. Many teachers hold low expectations — assuming such children “cannot learn” or “should stay home.” This mindset fuels disengagement and invisibility. Families, too, are pressured by stigma and costs. In Saptari, for instance, mothers of disabled daughters reported choosing early marriage over education because “people stopped asking about school — they just assumed she'd never marry.”

Sources: Room to Read (2020); Plan Nepal (2022); KOSHISH (2023); SSDP Review (2023)

Successful Interventions: What Works

Conditional Support and Material Aid

Bicycles, uniforms, and menstrual kits have proven effective. In Kailali, FAYA- Nepal's program led to a 700+ increase in girl attendance (Deuba, 2016). Disability aid (e.g., white cane, wheelchair) significantly boosts retention, especially when paired with peer mentoring.

Remote Mentoring and Awareness

During the pandemic, SMS and radio outreach helped maintain contact with girls at risk of marriage or dropout. World Vision's informal literacy classes showed strong re-engagement outcomes among older girls.

Inclusive Infrastructure and Resource Classes

CEHRD's network of resource classes supports children with specific needs. Though underfunded, these spaces provide adapted instruction, assistive tools, and linkage to mainstream settings.

Female Teachers and Peer Clubs

Female educators improve attendance and confidence among girls, particularly in rural and conservative communities. Child clubs, supported by Save the Children and UNICEF, promote leadership, gender equality, and disability visibility.

Sources: Deuba (2016); CEHRD (2023); Plan Nepal (2022); UNICEF (2020)

Comparative Insights: Bhutan and Bangladesh

Nepal lags behind its regional neighbors in certain aspects of inclusive education. Bhutan integrates Special Education Needs (SEN) into teacher training nationwide, while Bangladesh has

established Inclusive Education Resource Centers (IERCs) to deliver stipends, assistive devices, and targeted learning.

Country	Inclusion Strengths	Challenges
Nepal	Legal frameworks, resource classes, active civil society	Infrastructure gaps; poor data; weak implementation
Bhutan	SEN policy, teacher training, community outreach	Small scale; limited diversity of services
Bangladesh	Disability ID system; stipend schemes; girls' education parity	Low rural coverage; limited tracking of aspirations

Sources: Bhutan MoE (2022); Bangladesh MoE (2022); World Bank (2023)

Institutional Landscape

Efforts remain fragmented between federal ministries, municipalities, and NGOs. While federalism has decentralized mandates, local governments often lack:

- Trained personnel in inclusive planning
- Operational budgets for disability and gender inclusion
- Access to CEMIS or real-time school data

DPOs and women's groups have emerged as vital actors — but are often confined to urban centers. In Dhading and Bhaktapur, community-based rehabilitation (CBR) models show promise by bridging schools, health posts, and caregivers.

Sources: DRC Reports (2021–2023); SSDP Monitoring (2023); KOSHISH (2023)

Strategic

Recommendations System-Level Reform

- Appoint and train Gender & Disability Officers in each municipality Create a Joint Inclusion Unit within MoEST and MoWCSC
- Fund school-level Inclusion Committees with parent-child representation

Infrastructure and Pedagogy

- Retrofit all public schools with universal design standards
- Introduce inclusive pedagogy modules in teacher colleges (e.g., sign language, mental health, AAC)
- Expand resource classes and mobile outreach units for remote districts

Incentives and Data Systems

- Link scholarships and transfers to EMIS verification and attendance Shift toward need-based in-kind support (pads, devices, transport)
- Integrate Washington Group Questions + aspiration prompts in school surveys
- Use CEMIS to identify out-of-school and at-risk children for local planning

Community Engagement

- Provide care stipends for mothers of disabled children Launch inclusive storytelling campaigns across media
- Promote peer clubs and aspiration workshops featuring role models

Conclusion: Aspiration is a Right

Girls and children with disabilities are not fringe cases in Nepal's education story— they are its conscience. If education is to serve its moral purpose, it must move from metric-based access to dignity-based inclusion. Each girl who dares to dream, and each child with a disability who demands to be heard, reflects the future Nepal is capable of building.

"In my dreams, I teach in a school with ramps and pink walls. No one laughs when I speak," — Girl with cerebral palsy, Banke



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Disclaimers

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