



**Struggle of
Adolescent Girls:
Transformation
Through Movement**
A Study

Changes Brought by Campaign Among Adolescent Girls: A Study

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Publisher



WOREC

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Women's Rehabilitation Centre (WOREC)

Introduction

The Women's Rehabilitation Centre (WOREC) is a not-for-profit non-government organisation that has been struggling to establish women's rights/human rights for the past 32 years. The organisation works for women and communities from marginalised ethnic, regional, sexual and gender backgrounds and is active in responding to underlying causes and consequences of discrimination.

A discriminatory perspective that looks at women as weaker second-class citizens still exists in our society today due to the prevalent unequal power relations. Women have therefore been compelled to survive violence in different forms and their leadership is not easily accepted. Adopting the feminist concept that personal is political, the organisation believes that policy response and transformation in thoughts are essential in achieving women's rights. Accordingly, the organisation has been carrying out group campaigns in cooperation and coordination with community-based women's and adolescent girls' networks and organisations for the social, economic and political rights of women. Likewise, the organisation has been advocating for women's rights from the local to international levels creating and managing learning and knowledge from the documentation and analysis of women's life experiences.

Vision

A society that has achieved feminist aspirations.

Mission

Promotion of human rights of women and the end of all forms of structural discrimination through feminist work in groups

Objectives of the five-year plan (2023-2027) towards achieving the vision and mission of the organisation

Thematic working areas of the organisation

- Human rights and social justice
- Environmental/ecological justice and women's leadership
- Quality services
- Learning and knowledge management
- Contribute to creating an environment in which women can live with respect as equal citizens without surviving any form of violence,
- Expand voices of women and trans rights activists for women's economic and health rights and their bodily integrity,
- Expand the organisation as a feminist resource centre for social movements,
- Consolidate campaigns for women's right to work, right to social security and right to proportional inclusive participation at all levels of the state,
- Support conflict-affected women to strengthen mechanisms for conflict-affected people's right to justice and just reparation,
- Advocate for the implementation of the state commitments expressed in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, 1979; International Covenant on Social, Economic and Cultural Rights, 1966; Universal Periodic Reviews and Sustainable Development Goals 5, 8 and 16.

WOREC demands women's right to bodily integrity; this is our human right. Only when women have control over their bodies, all forms of structural discrimination against them come to an end and the prosperity that we long for can be achieved. Therefore, the need of the hour is to strengthen the social transformation campaign through the expansion and consolidation of group work and women's and adolescent girls' networking.

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Sadhana's Struggle

Sadhana Harijan from Suddhodan Rural Municipality got the opportunity to stay at different hotels in Bhairahawa and Butwal to participate in various events. Having started to perform in street drama, she promptly decided to enrol in acting classes. In her pursuit to do so, she came to Kathmandu where she stayed at luxurious hotels with attached toilets.

A hotel carries a special meaning in Sadhana's life, whether she is attending programmes or staying overnight. Every time she used a hotel's toilet, Sadhana's heart would sink.

"I used to feel lightheaded when I went to the toilet. One question always lingered on my mind - Why don't we have a toilet in our house?"

After returning home from hotels, she always had to defecate in the open. That pained her. However, that pain gave her the courage to stand up and do something about it.

Sadhana was earning a modest remuneration from her street performances and received support from some when she attended. She began setting aside the money and saved up around Rs 40,000. She wanted to use the money to build a toilet in her home and went to her father with the proposal. Her father, however, was not too keen and was resistant to the idea and scolded Sadhana, saying, "No one in the village has a toilet. Are you just trying to follow a trend? Why do you need a toilet?"

Nonetheless, Sadhana stood her ground. She understood the fundamental importance of having a toilet. She continued her efforts to convince her father with the help of her brothers. Eventually, they managed to use the savings to construct the first toilet in the village.

Research Question

Sadhana's campaign for toilets encompasses the nuanced elements of social change. Social change is typically defined as a transformation in the broader social framework, encompassing significant shifts in political spheres, modifications in social institutions, and extensive alterations in social structures. However, these conventional concepts of social change often overlook the finer, more intricate aspects that drive it.

This study focuses on precisely these subtle factors of social change, drawing from a study of how participation in social campaigns has catalysed transformations in the lives

of adolescent girls in the Rupandehi and Kapilvastu districts. Specifically, this study delves into the journey of adolescent girls associated with the Girls Rights Forum ('Kishori Adhikar Manch'), who have transcended social constraints and challenged detrimental traditional norms imposed upon them. It examines their pivotal role in driving societal change, as well as the personal transformations they have experienced throughout the empowerment process.

In the context of this study, the term 'Abhiyan' ('campaign') encompasses a wider concept. Here, the 'campaign' refers to the programmes, diverse activities, and collective social endeavours undertaken by individual adolescent girls, facilitated by the Adolescent Girls' Rights Forum (Kishori Adhikar Manch) and supported by organisations such as WOREC Nepal, CARE Nepal, and others. Essentially, any social initiative undertaken by adolescent girls within a communal setting has been considered a campaign here.

This study comprises two primary components. Firstly, it aims to examine the endeavours made by adolescent girls in transcending social constraints. Secondly, it seeks to analyse the transformations experienced by adolescent girls as a result of their involvement in the campaign, and the subsequent impact of these changes on society.

Scope of the Study

This study focuses on adolescent girls participating in the Adolescent Girls' Rights Forum in the Rupandehi and Kapilvastu districts. Adolescent Girls' Rights Forum is a district-level network registered in 2019. WOREC Nepal and CARE Nepal are supporting the formation and subsequent activities of the Adolescent Girls' Rights Forum (Kishori Adhikar Manch).

Methodology

This study has been conducted using qualitative research methods. To facilitate this, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 46 adolescent girls from Rupandehi and Kapilvastu. In addition to interviews, the study employed methods like observation, field notes, case studies, and focus group discussions.

The interview records were transcribed word by word and thoroughly analysed for this study. A field survey was carried out for eight days in June 2022. Furthermore, additional information was gathered through telephone conversations, meetings, and social media as required after the field survey was completed.

Study Limitations

The objective of this study is to examine the transformations instigated by the involvement of adolescent girls in campaigns facilitated through the collaborative efforts of the Girls' Rights Forum and supporting organisations such as WOREC Nepal and CARE Nepal.

Why Adolescent Girls?

Adolescence encompasses the age range from 10 to 19 years, signifying the transition from childhood to adulthood.¹ As per the 2021 census, individuals within this age bracket constitute 24.12 per cent of the total population. Similarly, data from the annual household survey of 2016/17 indicates that the 10 to 19 age group makes up 22.5 per cent. Moreover, based on the 2021 census, within the two districts under examination, Rupandehi and Kapilvastu, this age group accounts for 24.44 per cent and 25.88 per cent of their total populations respectively. Given that this demographic section comprises a quarter of the entire population of the country, it is imperative to include them in the study.

Adolescence is considered an important period in a person's life. During adolescence, significant physical and cognitive transformations take place. This second decade of life marks the maturation of physical organs and substantial brain development. While adolescence commences with noticeable physical changes, its conclusion is less determined by biological processes and more influenced by social processes.²

The physiological and hormonal shifts in adolescence often give rise to a rebellious nature and challenging behaviour. As a result, today's child begins to shift focus from family and home towards peer groups and the broader community. This is a time when they embark on a journey to discover their own identity. Consequently, adolescence is regarded as a phase of learning, maturation, and the process of determining the kind of person they aspire to be in the future.³ It is important to note that societal values and beliefs play a significant role in influencing and shaping the growth of adolescents.

Adolescence encompasses more than just a phase of age or physical transformation; it represents a crucial stage in the process of socialisation. Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget

¹Safe Motherhood and Reproductive Health Rights Act, 2018

²Eveline A. Crone and Ronald E. Dahl. Understanding adolescence as a period of social-affective engagement and goal flexibility.

³Introduction to Sociology / Anthony Giddens [and three others].Description: Eleventh edition. | New York :W.W. Norton & Company, [2018] |

put forward that cognitive development during adolescence is intricately tied to the social environment. According to Piaget, cognitive development before adolescence is relatively autonomous, whereas, during adolescence, it becomes contingent on the process of growth. This maturation process is shaped by various factors including family dynamics, community influence, social institutions, and societal norms. As an individual undergoes the transition from childhood to adolescence, they also grapple with evolving gender norms.⁴

Growth during adolescence is not the same for boys and girls. Adolescence encompasses more than just a natural or physical transition. It is a social and cultural phenomenon that every individual must navigate in their life journey. Throughout this period, a person's gender identity and expression begin to undergo significant development.

Girls' Rights Forum: The Network Created out of Abhiyan (the Campaign)

Girls' Rights Forum is the network founded in 2018. It operates primarily in the districts of Rupandehi and Kapilvastu in Nepal and is officially registered with state agencies.

This is characterised as a district level girls network of adolescent girls organised by themselves, dedicated to safeguarding and advancing their human rights.⁵ The network has committees at the ward, municipality, and district levels. Additionally, a provincial committee has been established to establish it as a provincial-level organisation.

Girls' Rights Forum is the network born out of a campaign. The adolescent girls who spearheaded the establishment of this platform were already engaged in various campaigns. The youth involved in its inception were active participants in initiatives led by organisations like CARE Nepal, Siddhartha Samudayik Samaj (SSS), and Dalit Social Development Centre, among others. These dedicated adolescent girls came together to establish the Girls' Rights Forum. The network was established in 2018 and officially registered in 2019.

⁴Nicola Jones, Elizabeth Presler-Marshall and Fiona Samuels. The significance of adolescence in the life course. In *Empowering Adolescent Girls in Developing Countries*. Ed. Caroline Harper and other. Routledge: New York (2018). Pp. 1-21

⁵Girls' Rights Forum brochure

WOREC has been collaborating with these adolescent girls for the past three years. Their efforts extend to building networks and conducting campaigns at the community level through feminist approach. These adolescents engage in open discussions about the control they have over their sexuality and the repercussions of unequal power dynamics. Through the analysis of issues such as child marriage and other forms of sexual violence stemming from the control over sexuality, the girls have started asserting their rights over their bodies.

Girls' Rights Forum's objectives extend beyond merely connecting adolescent girls; they also focus on raising awareness against structural discrimination, advocating for change, and fostering personal development. In the five-year strategic plan of Girls' Rights Forum, the vision and goals are outlined as follows:

Vision

Empowering girls and fostering leadership skills through advocacy efforts and campaigns, to establish a just and discrimination-free society.

Goals

1. Enhancing the capacity of the Girls' Rights Forum to cultivate leadership skills,
2. Expanding the presence of adolescent girls within the community to drive social transformation.

The term 'Abhiyan' ('campaign') in this study extends beyond the programmes exclusively conducted by the Girls' Rights Forum as it leaves a long background behind. Given that the awareness of the girls involved in the platform is deeply intertwined with various campaigns even before the platform's inception, it is fitting to understand their current activism in light of their past engagement.

Adolescence is not a homogeneous category but an age group. The girls affiliated with Girls' Rights Forum come from diverse family, social, economic, and ethnic backgrounds. As a result, disparities exist in terms of social, economic, and political resources. However, the majority of adolescent girls actively participating in this platform advocating for girl's rights predominantly originate from the southern regions of Rupandehi and Kapilvastu, with a significant number belonging to Dalit families. Despite these variances, the burden of experiencing gender discrimination, deprivation, and prejudiced social norms is a shared reality for most adolescent girls. Consequently, the term "Kishori" (adolescent girls) not only signifies an age group but also embodies a social class growing up amidst similar forms of discrimination.

Recognising the Ability to Speak Up

In a patriarchal society, women and men undergo different socialisation processes. Men and boys are encouraged to focus on earning money, gaining knowledge, engaging in worldly pursuits, and acquiring skills. On the other hand, women and girls are directed towards household responsibilities, nurturing relationships, and adhering to traditional rituals. The fundamental characteristic of a patriarchal society is the imposition of restrictions on girls and women.

The adolescent girls associated with Girls' Rights Forum frequently refer to the term 'harmful social norms and values'. By this, they mean prevalent societal norms and values that hinder their personal development and deny them basic human rights. These harmful social norms and values manifest primarily within the home environment and are perpetuated through the process of socialisation. They curtail girls' ability to freely express their emotions, articulate their thoughts in discussions, and access public spaces.

The majority of adolescent girls on the platform emphasise the newfound ability to speak for themselves when discussing the changes, they have experienced. This newfound capacity to "speak" extends beyond merely participating in programmes, and it is not limited to transitioning from Awadhi or Bhojpuri to Nepali. They highlight that they have triumphed over their previous fear of vocalising their thoughts and feelings.

Sheela Yadav, 20, of Kapilvastu Municipality says she has developed a sense of determination to vocalise and advocate for both her own rights and the rights of others.

Regina Pariyar, 19, of Sainamaina Municipality in Rupandehi says she used to struggle in front of large audiences.

"The fear of expressing my thoughts held me back. However, ever since I became a part of Girls' Rights Forum, I've gained the confidence to articulate my thoughts in front of anyone, even in front of a large audience."

Fear is a socio-cultural construct, deliberately instilled to confine individuals to the margins of the social framework. It serves as a tool for those in power to maintain control over those they govern. In the words of Antonio Gramsci, fear is an instrument of dominion. It is instilled through notions of honour, sin, and entrenched social customs, suppressing free expression. To stifle expression is to stifle inquiry. Mahatma Gandhi's wisdom underscores the potency of fear as a means of governance. He imparted a crucial message to the Indian freedom movement: 'Remove fear from your heart, and the mighty rulers of the world will bow before you.'

The statement 'I can speak' holds significant weight for adolescents. It signifies a heightened self-awareness and helps them recognise their identity during their journey into adulthood.

The initial step towards change, however, is self-awareness, the acknowledgement of having faced rejection, discrimination, and oppression, and the decision to forge a path towards transformation. Among girls actively involved in various campaigns, the resounding sentiment is 'I can speak', signifying their triumph over fear.

Pointing out the victory over fear, Urmila Agrahari of Marchwari Rural Municipality says, "Previously, I struggled to communicate even with familiar faces; now, I can engage with strangers. Earlier, I wouldn't dare to visit the ward or municipality office, but now, I do. The mere thought of encountering the police used to intimidate me, but that fear has disappeared."

The realisation that 'I am capable of speaking' marks a crucial turning point for marginalised adolescent girls from lower castes as it prompts them to contemplate their lives. The inability to speak can lead to a sense of rejection and suppression, constraining one's life experiences, and this is often a consequence of the prevailing social environment. Therefore, comprehension serves as the initial step towards transformation.

Increased Mobility

In a patriarchal society, women's autonomy over their sexuality, freedom of movement, rights to ancestral property and inheritance are constrained. Within Nepali patriarchy, the extent of these restrictions varies based on caste, region, and class. The majority of girls involved in the Girls' Rights Forum represent the Madhesi Dalit community, which is positioned at the lowest stratum of the social hierarchy. In this society, marked by a long history of discrimination and marginalisation, the limitations imposed on girls from this community tend to be more compared to girls from higher castes, classes, and regions who hold elevated positions within the social hierarchy.

Another shared experience among the majority of adolescent girls in this study is an enhancement in their mobility. Through their involvement in the campaign, girls gained the ability to venture beyond their community and geographical confines to take part in various programmes. For Madhesi girls in Rupandehi and the southern part of Kapilvastu, a city located 10-20 km away was once a distant aspiration.

Tija Sahni, a 20-year-old from Kotahimai Rural Municipality in Rupandehi, shared her experiences of leaving her home during the campaign, stating, "I've travelled to Butwal,

Bhairahwa, Taulihawa, Tilaurakot, and even Kathmandu." Her face radiated with confidence as she spoke.

Similarly, 19-year-old Radhika Raidas from Kapilvastu Municipality, Kapilvastu, said, "I've gained the ability to step out of my house. As a result, today I can present my concerns in front of everyone."

This newfound freedom to venture beyond their homes, to reach the nearest market, or even travel to the capital, signifies a breaking of social boundaries. Girls now feel empowered to move about freely. Throughout the study, when they visited villages in the southern regions of Rupandehi and Kapilvastu, the girls carefully chose their words and expressed themselves. They often found it challenging to articulate all their feelings clearly in front of their families. Upon reaching certain villages, the mothers of some adolescent girls would gather together to listen to their conversations. However, during subsequent programmes held in markets and hotels, these girls would speak openly. They shared experiences that they could not discuss at home, laughing openly as they did so.

The freedom of mobility entails more than just stepping out to visit the market for events; it involves actively participating in the public sphere. Achieving this requires adolescent girls to struggle with family dynamics.

Initially, Akshita Shukla, the president of the Adolescent Girls' Rights Forum in Kapilvastu, was accompanied by her brother when she left the house. However, now Akshita not only leads the adolescent girls of the district but also teaches at the Community Development Centre. She aspires to a life beyond the confines of her home, different from that of her mother.

Case Study 1

I want to live a different life

Akshita Shukla, 21 years old, is currently in her third year, Bachelor in Arts (BA). She comes from an educated family of six. Her father is employed abroad while her mother manages the house. Akshita has two brothers and one sister, all of whom are attending school.

In addition to her studies, Akshita works as a teacher at a community study centre. She has received



training in the Montessori teaching method. With aspirations to become the director of an NGO in the future, Akshita is actively involved as the president of the Adolescent Girls' Rights Forum in Kapilvastu.

Akshita attended a local school along with her younger brother. Organisations like CARE Nepal, Dalit Social Development Centre and Siddhartha Samudayik Samaj (SSS) organised 'transformation classes' as part of the 'Aba Mero Palo' campaign in her village time and again. It was when she was in grade five that she got to be a part of these sessions for the first time thanks to her teacher.

Initially, when Akshita learned about gender-based discrimination, she believed it did not occur in her home. "My father sent both my brother and me to the school. It appeared as if there was no discrimination in our household," Akshita recounted her experience during that period.

The transformation sessions came to an end after eight months. In 2018, the Girls' Rights Forum was established, and Akshita was appointed the district secretary. Initially, attending programmes proved to be quite challenging for her. Akshita recounted her early experiences, saying, "In the beginning, it was tough at home when I attended these programmes. Whenever I went somewhere, my younger brother would be sent along. People in the community would even inform my father, insinuating that the girls were going to hotels. That's how things are in our Terai region. Eventually, the women and men from CARE Nepal would come to our home and discuss the programme. Gradually, my family began to understand. I used to receive transportation expenses for attending the programmes, which I would inform to the family. This also played a role in building trust within the family."

Today, Akshita actively participates in various programmes and supplements her income by teaching at a community study centre. She gives most of the money she makes to her family who wholeheartedly support her. Through her involvement in Girls' Rights Forum campaigns, she noticed a significant boost in her confidence too.

Akshita, an advocate for her rights, is now dedicated to reducing child marriages in her community. This journey started differently. In her community, many of her peers are already married, as most girls are forced to drop out at grade 7 or 8. However, Akshita's education has continued without interruption, thanks to her activism through the Girls' Rights Forum. When asked how she was able to decline a marriage proposal at home,

Akshita said, "If I hadn't joined the Girls' Rights Forum, I might have been married by now."

She recalls how her father asked her not to study beyond grade 10. "At first, I found it hard to talk to him about it. However, I mustered the courage to express my determination to continue my education. Two marriage proposals came along. I remember when my parents showed me the boy's photo, my mother mentioned that he was well-off and had property. The boy's family had demanded Rs 500,000 as dowry along with a car. I pointed out that I have a sister too. If this amount is spent on me, what will be left for her? I inquired about the boy's education, to which my father informed me that he had completed twelfth grade and was currently running a cement shop. I reasoned that if he had any issues, he would not have left his studies. Thankfully, my father and mother agreed not to go through with the marriage."

"Then came another proposal. My father inquired whether I, his daughter, would have the opportunity to work. When they indicated that they would only allow it if the workplace was nearby, my father decided to decline the proposal. Many girls find it difficult to communicate such matters with their fathers. I used to be in the same position. Even if there were issues, I couldn't talk to my father, and I couldn't confide in my mother. Now, I can."

Apart from stopping her own child marriage, she has also stopped four others in the Karma village. She tried to stop two others but was unsuccessful in doing so. She voices a concern that while people's representatives play a role in reducing child marriage, their contribution to actively stopping such marriages falls short of what is truly needed.

"A law against child marriage exists, but its effective application is lacking in Nepal. What is disheartening is the local representatives know this is happening as they themselves attend these weddings," says Akshita.

In her crusade against child marriages, she has confronted harsh accusations, like being labelled as a troublemaker due to her privileged background. Yet, witnessing the hardships endured by girls in her community fuels her determination. She is resolute in her commitment not to follow in her mother's footsteps.

She says, "There's a clear difference between my mother and me. My mom's education stopped at grade 5. She is confined to the home, veiled, and faces domestic challenges. I aim for a different path."

She has come to understand the significance of education. Akshita has observed that education even influences the way people choose their clothing. She explained the connection between girls' attire and education in her community, saying, "Girls who have discontinued their education and remain at home typically wear traditional kurta-suruwal. On the other hand, students in grades 10-12 often opt for jeans and tops."

As mobility increases, there is a notable rise in girls' continued education. However, Rupandehi and Kapilvastu are districts where girls tend to discontinue their education. Examining the data, it is evident that the gender ratio decline is more apparent in these districts as students progress through classes.

In 2016, the gender ratios for classes 1 to 5 were 1.10 in Rupandehi and 1.06 in Kapilvastu. Moving to classes 6-8, Rupandehi had a ratio of 1.01 while Kapilvastu's was 0.90. For classes 9-10, Rupandehi's ratio was 0.85 and Kapilvastu's was 0.82. In classes 11-12, the figures stood at 0.84 for Rupandehi and 0.96 for Kapilvastu.⁶ These statistics reveal a decrease in the number of female students as they advance in their education, underscoring a dropout pattern.

Factors like child marriage, the dowry system, and poverty significantly contribute to this trend. However, a more prominent factor is the restriction on mobility. There exist beliefs rooted in notions like not going to the home of a person who is of a 'lower caste' and the perception that investing in a daughter is 'wasting money'. There is a prevailing fear that sending a grown-up daughter 'out' may lead to a perceived reputation being ruined in the community.

The majority of the girls interviewed for the study attend school regularly. Some have even temporarily dropped out but later resumed their studies (for instance, refer to Case Study 2). Many parents in the community are either illiterate or have only completed basic education. Despite this, the girls' education remains consistent. For instance, Khusbu Harijan's father is illiterate, but in a community where illiteracy is prevalent, Pushpa Harijan is pursuing a bachelor's degree, defying the odds.

⁶Province 5 Profile. Provincial Policy and Planning Commission. 2018/19. Page 105

Shalini Mishra stands as the first woman in her community to pursue a bachelor's degree. Similarly, Sadhana Harijan passed her School Leaving Certificate (SLC) in 2016 and is currently in grade 11. The campaign has effectively raised awareness about the importance of education for girls. However, certain girls face challenges in maintaining regular attendance due to financial constraints and familial duties.

For instance, a young woman from Rupandehi, who became the head of a family of four after her father's sudden passing, takes on the roles of a homemaker and an agricultural labourer in her village. Despite her college enrolment, her studies are intermittently disrupted. Her brother, who is also pursuing education, works in a market near the village, further complicating their academic pursuits. These situations appear to be driven more by financial responsibilities than by gender-based discrimination, resulting in interruptions in their studies.

Intervention for Citizenship

Citizenship stands out as a significant issue in the Madhes region. On one hand, state-imposed legal hurdles make it challenging to acquire citizenship. Additionally, existing laws also impose limitations on obtaining citizenship. This issue is particularly more for girls, who often face barriers in obtaining their rightful citizenship.

Girls and women first face issues from the family. They often encounter resistance, primarily driven by concerns related to property rights. There is apprehension that once women gain citizenship, they may engage in work and business activities outside the home—domains traditionally dominated by men. This shift can be unsettling for the male members of the family as they fear a potential loss of control over financial matters if women are empowered economically.⁷ Hence, citizenship is vital not just for legal membership in the state and the accompanying privileges and rights, but also for enabling social mobility and fostering personal freedom.

The regular work of the Girls' Rights Forum is to take the initiative to register the birth of girls and make them citizens. The adolescent girls involved in the platform each have their own tales of grappling for birth registration and citizenship. Now, they are actively advocating within their families and communities for the citizenship rights of other girls in society. Sunita Harijan, a president of Rupandehi Girls' Rights Forum, who is now taking initiatives for the citizenship of other girls, also had to push hard for her own citizenship. For that, she had to promise not to seek rights over the property.

⁷Shreshta, Laxmi. 2019/20. Citizenshiplessness of Madhesi Women: Patriarchy in Family, Society and the State. On-foot Research: Experiment and Achievement. Sohan Prasad Sah and Mahesh Raj Maharjan, ed, pg: 23-40. Kathmandu: Martin Chautari.

Case Study 2

Returned to school and obtained a citizenship certificate

Sunita Harijan from Majhana in Lumbini Sanskritik Municipality-2 has been involved with the Girls' Rights Forum since its establishment in 2018. Sunita, who is the founding vice president of the Girls' Rights Forum, Rupandehi, has now been appointed as the district president.



Sunita comes from a family of 13 members who rely on agriculture for their livelihood. Her family includes her parents, three brothers, and three sisters-in-law, as well as her younger siblings, nephews, and nieces. Two of her sisters are already married. Their landholding amounts to only two kattha (676 square metres), so they have also rented additional land for crop production. Two of Sunita's brothers are employed in a hotel, and the household relies on their income.

Sunita is currently enrolled in grade 12 at Balrampur Secondary School, where she is pursuing a health subject in the education stream. The school is located half a kilometre away. She has to walk to school every day.

Sunita, who aspires to get a master's degree, faces challenges in attending school regularly. After completing the seventh grade, her studies were halted, and she had to stay at home. In the Madhesi community of Rupandehi and the southern part of Kapilvastu, there is a lack of awareness regarding girls' education. Sunita's education was further interrupted when she was informed that her purpose was to fulfil household responsibilities in someone else's home. This added to the challenges she faced in pursuing her studies.

However, an initiative by CARE Nepal called the 'Udan' class, run at her school, made a significant impact on her life. This programme was designed to support girls who had discontinued their education. The classes incorporated extracurricular activities alongside regular lessons. These classes also included an awareness programme. Sunita began attending these classes consistently. She attended these classes lying to her family stating she was going to cut grass for livestock. A year later, upon hearing that she had successfully passed, a teacher visited her home and informed her parents. This event encouraged Sunita to resume attending school regularly. Following this transformative experience, Sunita began to believe that girls like herself, who faced barriers to education, should be supported and provided with the opportunity to learn.

Due to child marriage, women's autonomy over their sexuality is constrained. In 2018, a meeting was convened in Bhairahawa to establish the Girls' Rights Forum. Sunita was present at this gathering, on behalf of the Udan students, and was subsequently elected the vice president. Presently, she is actively dedicated to ensuring the continuity of girls' education. Throughout her journey from house to house in her pursuit of education, Sunita has encountered various perspectives and faced numerous challenges. Nevertheless, she has persisted, reminding parents of their responsibilities and advocating for the significance of education. Sunita shares her experiences, noting that when she visits her friends' homes to encourage them to attend school, their parents often express fear.

"They tell me I will have to take blame and responsibility if anything wrong happens to their daughter," she says.

Another challenge prevalent in Sunita's community is the struggle to obtain birth registration and citizenship for daughters. Initially, Sunita's family was hesitant too. However, her understanding of its importance grew as she became actively involved in the Girls' Rights Forum. Sunita took up the fight for her citizenship within her home. Although her father initially harboured doubts and was concerned that Sunita might claim property rights similar to his son, Sunita assured him that she had no intention of making such demands. Eventually, she was able to obtain her citizenship.

Thanks to the efforts of the Girls' Rights Forum, numerous girls have now acquired their citizenship. The platform actively facilitates school admissions, birth registrations, and citizenship procedures.

Sunita currently takes charge of planning programmes for the Girls' Rights Forum, addresses events, and strengthens connections with the local community. Her involvement in stage programs has elevated her profile, leading to increased support within her household. As a result, her brothers are now more supportive and willing to assist her.

Sunita reflects on the transformed atmosphere at home, saying, "In the past, I would be scolded so much if I glanced at my older brother using a mobile phone nearby. Now, my brother not only bought me a phone but also rides me to programmes."

Sunita harbours ambitions of becoming a political leader in the future. She believes that she can advocate for the rights of women and girls by assuming a leadership role. She acknowledges that her involvement in the Girls' Rights Forum has likely prevented a child marriage from taking place. Presently, Sunita is actively engaged in Rupandehi, working to combat child marriage and raise awareness among girls. At times, she even extends her efforts to areas like Kapilvastu, Arghakhanchi, Banke, and Bardiya.

Reduction in Child Marriage

The main focus of the Girls' Rights Forum is to combat child marriage. According to a survey conducted in 2016, the median age of marriage for women in the age group of 25 to 49 is 17.9 years, while for men, it is 21.7 years. The data reveals that 13 per cent of girls are married off by the age of 15 while only 3 per cent of boys are married at the same age. Furthermore, 52 per cent of girls are married by the age of 18, in contrast to 19 per cent of boys marrying at the same age.⁸

Child marriage rates vary based on geography and caste communities. It is notably more prevalent in the Madhesi community, as well as among impoverished and marginalised groups. The Girls' Rights Forum is particularly active in the areas where the Madhesi community is predominant, recognising that the incidence of child marriage is higher compared to the northern parts of Rupandehi and Kapilvastu.

Due to child marriage, women's autonomy over their sexuality is constrained. All the adolescent girls who were interviewed for the study expressed fear that there would be turmoil in the family. The mother of Akshita Shukla, the president of the Girls' Rights Forum in Kapilvastu, is delighted by her daughter's transformation. She is pleased to see her daughter in the spotlight, speaking on stage, and travelling to places she never imagined. However, she constantly reminds her daughter stating, "We have placed our trust in her and allowed her to go out, so she must be cautious. We do not want to hear anything bad."

The word 'bad' conveys a deeper meaning here. 'Bad' means talking, walking, having a relationship with a boy and getting married to someone they choose. Families often fear that if they allow girls to have autonomy over their sexuality, the girls may make choices that are not in line with traditional expectations. This is a significant factor driving the push for early marriages as it is seen as a way to maintain control over their lives and decisions.

In conversations with girls actively involved in the Girls' Rights Forum, there is a palpable sense of pressure to uphold their family's trust. These girls, engaged in the campaign, demonstrate a heightened awareness of their autonomy and decision-making compared to their peers in the community. Their confidence has seen a noticeable boost. Some have even successfully declined marriage proposals and resisted family-initiated marriages. However, it is worth noting that even these young activists in the campaign harbour doubts about their ability to make independent decisions regarding marriage.

In the course of the study, many girls were engaged in discussions regarding marriage, the process of selecting a life partner, and the rituals involved in marriage. Most of the girls expressed optimism that being able to choose their life partner could potentially lead to a reduction in dowry-related issues. They believed they would have the freedom to choose based on their interests, thus

⁸Nepal Demographic and health survey 2016, Ministry of Health, Nov. 2017. Pp 75-77.

maintaining their independence. However, a significant number of them harboured apprehensions about selecting their own life partner.

One girl, fearful of this, said, “It will be easier if I can choose a boy. But we don’t know how the person is as it’s hard to understand the true nature of a person so quickly. I think it is hard to understand a person fully. When that is the case, where do we go when things go wrong? Can I go back to my father? Even if something were to happen after my father arranged the marriage, there would still be someone to confide in. Therefore, while choosing for myself might be a positive idea, I find myself hesitant to do so.”

Even though there is some apprehension about making independent choices in marriage, young activists are aware of the importance of reducing child marriages. One of the core functions of the Girls' Rights Forum is to conduct awareness programmes aimed at curbing child marriage and, if needed, to take immediate action. The active teenagers within the platform affirm their dedication to preventing child marriages through guidance and fostering understanding. However, there are situations where they must intervene with the help of local law enforcement and public representatives.

The strict control over girls' sexuality can put even confident girls in the campaign at risk of child marriage during difficult times. In response, the Girls' Rights Forum takes decisive action to prevent these marriages from happening.

Shalini Mishra, the treasurer of the Girls' Rights Forum in Kapilvastu, recounted an incident where she had to seek the help of the police administration and people’s representatives to prevent the child marriage of a friend. She emphasised that in order to compel the involvement of these figures, they had to assertively communicate that they would not receive votes in the upcoming elections if they did not take action to halt child marriage.

Case Study 3

'Threatening' a people's representative to stop child marriage

Shalini Mishra, aged 18, serves as the treasurer of the Girls' Rights Forum in Kapilvastu. She is presently enrolled in grade 12, specialising in English within the education stream. She lives in Khungagawa in Kapilvastu.

Shalini comes from a family of six members, all of whom are educated. Her father holds a BSc degree and works in agriculture while her mother has completed grade 12. Two of her sisters and one brother are pursuing university-



level education, and another sister is currently in school. The family owns a three-bigaha (20,000-square-metre) farm along with a concrete house.

Shalini is actively involved in various extracurricular activities, such as debates, elocutions and quizzes at school. Her engagement in activism plays a significant role in her personal development and character building.

When Shalini was in grade 10, there were no organisations in her village. Initially, a programme called 'Aba Mero Palo' (Tipping Point) was conducted there by CARE Nepal, Siddhartha Samudayik Samaj (SSS) and Dalit Social Development Centre. This programme conducted weekly classes where discussions on topics like sexuality and reproductive health took place. Adolescents, along with their mothers and fathers, actively participated. These discussions covered various aspects including clothing, nutrition, mobility, as well as the girls' involvement in family decision-making processes. Child marriage was also a key issue.

Furthermore, there were interactions among teenagers, mothers, fathers, and community leaders. Shalini received increased support and encouragement from her family to engage in campaigns after participating in 'Aba Mero Palo'. After 17 months, the programme concluded. Then, in 2018, the Girls' Rights Forum was formed. Shalini, however, joined in 2020.

Child marriage is widespread in Shalini's community. Shalini and Girls' Rights Forum are actively engaged in reducing child marriage through stakeholders and local government support. Shalini has many stories of her trying to stop child marriage. Shalini narrates an example of efforts to stop child marriage in this way.

“Some of the girls who joined 'Aba Mero Palo' were already on the verge of early marriage. We were able to prevent a few of them from going through with it. In one instance, we intervened just before a friend's wedding. She had been accused of having an 'affair' simply because she was seen walking with a boy. This incident underscores how societal notions of honour are imposed on us, the girls. As soon as the family caught wind of the situation, wedding preparations went into high gear.”

“Desperate, my friend called Sirjana Didi, who would guide our group, late at night, expressing her unwillingness to proceed with the marriage. She told us, “I don't even speak to him. My grade 12 exams are approaching, and I won't be able to take them. Please stop my marriage.” We immediately invited her to the next meeting. At this point, only two days remained until the wedding.”

“During the meeting, our friend reiterated her plea to halt the marriage. Afterwards, we headed to the police station and reported that they were attempting to force her to get married. Even the boy, who was also a teenager, expressed his reluctance. Accompanied by two policewomen, we all went to our friend’s house. We reminded our friend’s family that this act was against the law and that this was not the age for marriage.”

“In response, my friend’s parents scolded me, asserting that if I had come to stop the marriage, I should bear the financial responsibility for it. The ward chairman’s house was located in that village, so we approached him next. We even warned that if he didn’t take action to prevent this child marriage, we wouldn’t support him in the next election. The ward chairman took the matter seriously and intervened. He reminded everyone present that child marriage was a criminal act and that charges could be pressed.”

“The debate continued all day. We arrived at 10 in the morning and stayed until 6 in the evening. When we returned home, we were questioned about our whereabouts. Rumours spread throughout the village. The issue also reached the boy’s family. The police applied pressure the following day, ultimately leading to the cancellation of the wedding plan. Today, our friend is still pursuing her studies. She is now studying for her Bachelor of Education (BEd).”

Shalini, who is active in the community to end child marriage, was afraid to walk outside her house. Engagement in the campaign has brought about significant changes in Shalini’s life. However, this transformation has not come easily. While she had the freedom to leave her house, summoning the courage was a challenge. The symbolic violence and mistreatment she encountered during her journeys added to her struggles. She recounted a specific incident to highlight this, recalling, “Once, when I came to Butwal for a programme, the auto (rickshaw) driver harassed me. After that, I became afraid to travel alone. It was even hard for me to walk alone. For a while, I would ask my father to drop me off and pick me up.

“Facing one or two incidents does not deter us, especially when we discuss them in our meetings. We encouraged each other to confront such challenges, and I took that advice to heart. One day, I came to Butwal even though I did not have any specific business there. The journey involves travelling from home to Bhairahawa and then from Bhairahawa to Butwal. I made the trip back home, which took me three hours. This experience further bolstered my confidence. Now, I can go anywhere on my own. I have even travelled to Kathmandu by myself.”

Expansion into Dimensions of Life

“I aspire to become a police officer so that I can take action against men who drink alcohol and beat their wives,” says an adolescent girl about what she wants to do in life. Interestingly, among the girls participating in the campaign, six others also expressed a desire to become police officers. Additionally, there was a significant number interested in becoming teachers.

Leaders of the Girls' Rights Forum have also expressed their interest in pursuing various career paths, including aspiring to become political leaders, aiming to lead NGOs, and exploring opportunities in journalism.

The development of personal interests is inherently social as individuals conceive their aspirations within the framework of society. Pierre Bourdieu examined how social, cultural, and economic capital contributes to shaping individual interests. According to Bourdieu, people determine their preferences, choices, and inclinations based on the resources at their disposal. This includes even deeply personal aspects like hobbies, which are influenced by and, in turn, influence social interactions.⁹

Bourdieu highlights the significance of social capital, which is rooted in an individual's connections and networks. The campaigns have successfully expanded the social capital of adolescent girls. The primary objective of the Girls' Rights Forum is networking, signifying an effort to increase the overall social capital. The Girls' Rights Forum has evolved into a platform where girls can voice their concerns. It has also become a means of cultivating new friendships. During the study, it was noted that other girls engaged in the programme also took part in various social gatherings (such as weddings and religious ceremonies) hosted by the girls' families.

With the increase in social capital, interests have also broadened. In Pushpa Harijan's village in Lumbini Sanskritik Municipality in Rupandehi, issues like illiteracy and child marriage persist. Many girls around Pushpa's age are already married. Pushpa, however, has managed to overcome these social constraints. She is currently renting a room in Bhairahawa, around 35 kilometres away from her home, and taking English language classes. Her ambition is to pursue opportunities in Australia. This expansion of social capital has not only provided a platform but also opened up avenues for training, allowing the latent talents of girls to flourish.

⁹Pokharel, Sanjeev | Ek Ani Sunya | Publication Nepalaya | Kathmandu: 2021 | Page: 215

For example, Priyanka Harijan from Kothimai 4 in Rupandehi has developed a strong passion for acting. Through the campaign, she had the opportunity to attend acting classes. Street plays constitute a significant component of the campaign, and the girls involved have found drama to be highly effective in raising awareness within the community. Priyanka and her friends regularly perform on stage shows. Furthermore, Priyanka is also affiliated with Awadh Theatre in Bhairahawa (Refer to Case Study 4 for more details).

Much like Priyanka, Nilam Harijan from Suddhodhan Rural Municipality in Kapilvastu is another success story of a girl who was able to advance her education. Through her participation in the campaign, Nilam pursued a course to become a lab assistant with the financial support of the Dalit Social Development Centre. She received a scholarship covering half of the required fees for her studies. Nilam is currently balancing both work and further studies. Presently, she holds the position of treasurer at the Girls' Rights Forum in Kapilvastu.

Through their involvement in the campaign, these girls have gained access to small but significant opportunities that hold great importance in their lives. Many of the training programmes take place in hotels, providing them with various amenities like diverse food options, restroom facilities, and a conducive environment for personal freedom.

For instance, during community meetings, some girls were questioned about their choice of attire, especially if they were seen wearing the traditional kurta-suruwal. When asked why they did not opt for pants and t-shirts available in the village, they hesitated and mentioned they were afraid of "bad talk". This phrase "bad talk" implies concerns about their reputation. In other words, there are individuals in their community who act as 'moral police' of social norms, imposing restrictions on the girls. Wearing anything other than the 'prescribed' clothing in front of these 'moral police' is viewed as a 'breach of social norms'.

A week later, at a programme held at a resort in Rupandehi, the same girls were seen confidently wearing pants and t-shirts. This experience allowed them to express themselves through their clothing choices while participating in events.

Active participation in the campaign has expanded the girls' perspectives. They now consider not only their interests and aspirations but also the welfare of society. Archana Harijan from Lumbini Sankskriti Municipality stressed the shift in her thinking, saying, "I used to believe that the more I studied, the more housework I would have to do. Now, I understand the importance of being independent. Girls from villages and towns should be uplifted together." This newfound awareness highlights the girls' growing sense of agency and their recognition of the need for collective progress.

Case Study 4

She acts

Priyanka Harijan from Barahadwa, Kotahimai-4, Rupandehi has a keen interest in acting and is actively involved in street plays addressing social issues. Currently, she plays an active role in the Awadh Theatre in Bhairahawa. Moreover, she holds the position of district vice president at the Girls' Rights Forum, Rupandehi.



Priyanka's journey in acting is a remarkable one, particularly considering the lack of support from her family, school, and community in nurturing her talent. She comes from an underprivileged background. At 19, Priyanka is currently in grade 12. She hails from Barahdawa, Koathimai-4, located near the Indian border in the southern part of Rupandehi. Her father studied up to class 8 and works as a tailor in India. Priyanka is the eldest of three siblings, with her sister and brother currently pursuing their education at the school level. Their family owns a semi-concrete house and a farm with an area of one bigha (6,7723 square metres). However, due to it being under the joint ownership of his father and uncles, they do not have full rights over it, leading them to cultivate an additional two bigha land by paying a fee of Rs 48,000.

Before the inception of the Girls Rights Forum, Siddhartha Samudayik Samaj (SSS) was active in Priyanka's village, establishing an 'ama samuha' (a group of women). Over time, adolescent girls also got involved in these activities. This eventually paved the way for the formation of the Girls' Rights Forum. Through her active participation, Priyanka had the opportunity to travel from Butwal to Bhairahawa, and even to Kathmandu. This was a significant shift for Priyanka, who had not ventured far from her home, school, and the nearby Nautunwa Bazar. Gaining the trust of her family was crucial for this new experience. Reflecting on her first hotel stay, Priyanka recalls, "I went to Butwal for the first time with Ranju Didi from Omsatiya. I was afraid that I would get lost. There was a programme at oneHotel.

I had never been to such a big hotel before that. Initially, I was quite anxious. I worried if someone knocking on the door at night. As the hotel was by the road, I was also anxious about the constant noise of passing cars throughout the night."

Priyanka has overcome this fear now. She even had the opportunity to fly to Kathmandu to attend human rights related programme. While in Kathmandu, she also received drama training at Shilpee Theatre. She smiles as she recalls her experience of trying thukpa in the capital city. Nowadays, she commutes to Bhairahawa for theatre rehearsals every day. She first cycles for about 20 minutes and then catches a microbus. After a half-hour journey, she arrives in Bhairahawa. Following her morning classes, she heads to Bhairahawa in the afternoon. The Girls' Rights Forum has played a significant role in enabling her journey from home to the theatre.

Reflecting on this, Priyanka shares, "If I hadn't been involved in the Girls' Rights Forum, I would have just been shuttling between home and school. I would have been confined to the village. Many girls from my village haven't even been to Butwal."

Priyanka, through her active participation in various stage programmes, has developed confidence in speaking up. She now visits rural municipalities and ward offices to extend invitations for the programmes, seeking their support for the Girls' Rights Forum. Reflecting on her transformation, she shares, "I'm no longer afraid to go to rural municipalities. Initially, I wondered if they would even listen to us in such a big office. I used to be scared about who I would meet. The first time we went, Akalmati Ma'am (WOREC's facilitator) was with us. She assured us that everything would be fine. She initiated the conversation and encouraged us to speak as well. That's when I realised it wasn't as daunting as I thought. Now, I can go on my own," Priyanka expresses, highlighting her newfound confidence in approaching officials.

Priyanka, driven by her interest in acting, aspires to become a police officer. She shares, "I want to become a police officer. In our society, there are crimes and issues like child marriage, and domestic violence due to alcohol consumption. I believe that by becoming a police officer, I can work towards eradicating these social ills."

Expansion into the Public Sphere

The journey of breaking restrictive social norms towards reformative efforts is also an exercise in the spiritual transformation of the individual. The girls involved in the campaign have transcended their limitations and advanced towards personal growth. They can now organise events, formulate plans, oppose child marriage in their homes and communities, and advocate for citizenship rights within their households. This personal development is not achieved through a single effort; it requires social mobility. Personal development and social mobility are complementary processes. Individual development is facilitated within collective mobility, and conversely, individual development is a prerequisite for collective mobility.¹⁰

Access to the public sphere is essential for social mobility. However, patriarchal society often hinders girls and women's ability to move up the social ladder. This is why, from a young age, girls are subjected to strict social norms. These norms, rooted in the idea of being a 'good' daughter, have hindered girls from fully realising their potential. They are expected to be reserved, less talkative, and to uphold the 'respect' and 'dignity' of the household. Every day, every moment, girls feel the pressure to safeguard the family's name and honour.¹¹

After engaging in the campaign, the girls are shattering the social constraints imposed in the name of 'respect' and broadening their social connections. The Girls' Rights Forum's network has facilitated this process of empowerment. They confidently express their thoughts, emotions, and viewpoints during the monthly meetings of the forum committees, which are held at the ward, municipality, and district levels. This was evident from the minutes of a municipality-level Girls' Rights Forum meeting given below.

"Upon the discussion..., it was decided to convene regular meetings of the municipality-level Girls' Rights Forum on the last Saturday of each month."

¹⁰Adolescent Girl-Specific Programme in Women's Development: An Overview (The resource prepared for the local governments). Government of Nepal, Ministry of Women, Children and Senior Citizens, Department of Women and Children. 2018/19

¹¹<http://www.nccr.org.np/uploads/publication/cebc00888243d75ed0776e1123151e17.pdf>

Upon the discussion..., it was agreed to address the issues concerning girls monthly and endeavour to take proactive steps towards resolution."¹²

A monthly meeting was convened, fostering an environment for identifying their problems and collectively seeking solutions. These meetings evolved into a public forum, leading to the organisation, unity, and empowerment of the girls.

The girls' campaign focuses on bringing about reform. Their goal is to gain the support and consent of families and communities. A decision regarding the expansion of the Girls' Rights Forum's relationship with families was recorded in the municipality's meeting minutes:

"Upon the discussion..., a decision is made to inform the parents of the girls about the activities and initiatives undertaken by the Girls' Rights Forum.

Upon the discussion..., an interaction programme through a quiz among the parents of adolescent girls was held. This programme aimed to create awareness about the societal issues arising from restricting the freedom of adolescent girls, and to work towards fulfilling their dreams and aspirations."

"Upon the discussion..., it was acknowledged that both financial and social support from families are crucial in realising the dreams and aspirations of adolescent girls. The participating parents and teenagers expressed their commitment to provide such support in the future."¹³

Adolescents are seeking support from both family and community to facilitate their social mobility, and they are actively working towards this goal. Through persistent efforts, they have managed to gain some trust, resulting in an increase in social mobility to some extent. The campaigns have acted as a catalyst in expanding their public sphere. During these campaigns, girls have had the opportunity to explore new places, interact with peers from diverse sectors of society, and acquire valuable skills and training. An adolescent girl from the hilly community present at the third general meeting of the Girls' Rights Network in Rupandehi, expressed surprise upon learning about the distinct social conditions experienced by Madhesi girls. The social challenges faced by girls from hilly communities and those from Madhesi communities

¹²Excerpt from the minutes of the municipal-level Girls' Rights Forum meeting. Municipality's anonymity is maintained.

¹³Excerpt from the minutes of the municipal-level Girls' Rights Forum meeting. Municipality's anonymity is maintained.

differ significantly, highlighting the unique dimensions of their respective struggles. Through the Girls' Rights Forum, they have found a platform to come together despite these differences.

Bina Bhusal, the treasurer of the Girls' Rights Network, Buddha Bhumi Municipality Committee, Kapilvastuki, said, "Through our participation in various programmes, we had the opportunity to interact with friends from diverse backgrounds, which helped us gain a deeper understanding of different ways of life."

Access to public spaces is also about breaking personal boundaries. Adolescents from marginalised communities are gradually overcoming the discomfort they initially felt when using transportation and visiting hotels, shops, and markets.

While participating in various programmes, the girls also said they had initial difficulties when using certain toilets, walking on escalators, and entering large stores.

The Girls' Rights Forum also maintains a notable presence on social media. In both Rupandehi and Kapilvastu districts, they maintain active Facebook pages, effectively transforming them into a platform for public engagement. They have also provided training sessions on the responsible and safe use of social media and handling potential instances of online harassment. Sunita Harijan's experience is a relevant example. Initially discouraged by her brother, she eventually acquired a mobile phone while actively participating in the campaign. This enabled her to communicate freely from the comfort of her own home throughout the study.

Interacting with adolescent girls, especially on personal topics, can pose challenges for a male researcher due to prevailing social norms. During a focus group discussion with three adolescent girls in a village, the leader of the Girls' Rights Forum translated to their mothers what we were talking about in their own local language, Bhojपुरी. To facilitate the interaction, we brought along some small gifts. We deliberately chose an open venue to ensure a comfortable and non-threatening atmosphere. The three

girls sat together on one set of chairs while my colleague and I sat on another set of chairs, allowing a respectful and open conversation.

Around half an hour into the conversation while collecting this information for the research, the mother of a girl began aggressively scolding them in local language, asking why they were speaking so much with an outsider man. Engaging in a two-way dialogue with the mothers was challenging due to language barriers. The mothers of the other girls also intermittently approached, inquiring about the nature of the conversation. The girls mentioned that everything seemed normal when their mothers were present, but they felt comfortable discussing the pressure of marriage when their mothers were not around.

Adolescents, who often feel constrained by social norms within their families and communities, experience a sense of liberation when they engage in meetings, training programmes, and events. This newfound freedom allows them to openly discuss personal matters, family dynamics, and relationships. During a conversation with an adolescent girl who attended a programme outside her home, the topics of marriage and dowry were broached. She candidly shared that marrying a boy of her choice would eliminate dowry-related issues, and she mentioned that a boy had proposed to her.

The "self-defence training" conducted by the Girls' Rights Forum has significantly boosted their confidence as well. As these adolescent girls venture further into the public sphere, the girls' confidence in participating in the campaign has grown. This newfound confidence has ignited their dreams, encouraging them to envision a future beyond their previous limitations. They are now aspiring to achieve even greater heights.

Participation in the Decision-Making Process

The case of Sadhana, highlighted at the beginning of this study, demonstrates how girls' voices are gaining importance in household affairs through their active participation in the campaign. It is crucial to recognise that participation in the decision-making process should not be limited to formal policymaking spaces within the state.

The growing confidence and assertiveness of adolescents in making choices regarding household matters, education, personal matters, and even their own sexuality is striking. However, it is crucial to recognise that, in terms of both responsibilities and financial aspects, girls still often have a more limited role in household decision-making. This underscores the importance of broader societal changes to promote greater equality in these areas.

Girls have been actively involved in decision-making processes, as seen in Sadhana's case, where they played a role in matters like constructing toilets, ensuring school attendance, preventing child marriages, and securing family consent for participation in campaigns. Additionally, the young girls who are active in the campaign have gained increased recognition within their schools. Leaders of the Girls' Rights Forum are respected by both teachers and peers. Some leaders mentioned that when they communicate with the teachers over the phone, their advice and suggestions are taken into consideration when deciding on extracurricular activities. One teacher noted, "We often seek their advice on various school matters. Their input is invaluable, and we've observed that it strengthens the relationship between the school and other students."

The Girls' Rights Forum primarily conducts its programmes in municipalities and schools. As a result of their campaign involvement, the girls have established connections with local representatives and municipal authorities. Through these connections, they have been able to advocate for budget allocations from the municipality and collaborate on various initiatives. Additionally, they have successfully approached school administrations to request classrooms and support for organising various competitions, thereby expanding the school's involvement in these programmes.

The campaign has also contributed to an expansion in the role of girls in making personal decisions, particularly in matters related to their health. One girl shared her experience, saying, "I used to use cloth when I was menstruating. Later, I learned that using cloth in this way can lead to infections. Now, I use a sanitary pad."

Similarly, the Girls' Rights Forum has played a role in fostering an environment where girls feel empowered to make choices regarding their sexuality. It was observed that individuals with diverse sexual orientations were actively participating in the Girls' Rights Forum during the study. They expressed their happiness at advocating for gender equality through their involvement in these platforms.

Conclusion

Laura M. Ahearn, in her study on the influence of literacy and love letters on social change, references Marx's statement regarding the constraints individuals face in effecting social change. Marx's statement, as quoted in 'Invitation to Love: Literacy, Love Letters and Social Science in Nepal,' goes, "Individuals make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past."¹⁴ Marx articulated this notion while discussing the power shift from Louis Bonaparte in 1851. In this context, the term 'situation' in Marx's statement refers to the interplay between means of production and modes of production, as defined in Marx's terminology.

Marx's statement holds relevance in this context. The majority of girls engaged in the campaign hail from marginalised communities, facing economic, social and educational disadvantages. Moreover, they find themselves constrained by detrimental societal norms and beliefs perpetuated by the patriarchal structure. Adolescents often lack the agency needed to navigate through these barriers, cultivate their identities autonomously, and build self-confidence.

Breaking free from the shackles of harmful social norms and embarking on a journey of liberation is no small feat. It does not resemble a grand political upheaval or a meticulously planned social campaign. The enforcers of these norms reside within households and communities, making the struggle an intimate one. It is a battle fought in the heart of homes, not easily visible to the outside world, but immensely challenging.

The collective endeavours of the girls involved in the campaign are gradually reshaping the social landscape. However, as Marx observed, the boundaries set by social and cultural conditions are formidable. Dismantling deeply entrenched societal structures requires not only courage but also the necessary support, financial resources, intellectual and cultural assets, and a conducive social framework—elements essential for any sustained struggle. Long-term initiatives for transformative social change, the empowerment of agencies, the cultivation of leaders and committed advocates, are imperative. Unfortunately, girls from marginalised communities often find themselves deprived of these crucial opportunities.

¹⁴Laura M. Ahearn. Invitation to Love: Literacy, love letters and social change in Nepal. Adarsh books: 2004. pp245.

Various campaigns and the Girls' Rights Network itself have acted as catalysts in the girls' development. The experiences of the girls involved in the campaign span a relatively short timeframe of six years. In the context of transformative changes, this duration is rather brief. Consequently, it may be challenging to make out the sustained impact and multifaceted effects of the campaigns on the girls. However, there is a clear indication that these initiatives have planted numerous seeds of transformation.

One of the most significant outcomes is the girls' internalisation of the concept of gender equality. Their ability to address prevailing gender disparities within their community and actively contribute to reducing this inequality represents a form of 'localising the feminist movement'. During conversations, the girls frequently employed terms like 'sexuality', 'gender inequality' and 'gender', indicating their growing familiarity with these concepts and their efforts to interpret them within the context of their community. As a result, they approach the notion of 'stepping out' with great seriousness, recognising it as a crucial starting point for achieving greater mobility. In the words of anthropologist Michel Rosaldo, adolescents have come to understand that venturing beyond the confines of their homes and into the public sphere is the initial step towards liberation.

The Adolescent Girls' Rights Forum, a network that actively engages girls in campaigns and facilitates networking among them, is currently receiving support from WOREC and CARE Nepal. During the 3rd annual general meeting of the forum in Rupandehi, which took place on August 20, 2020, Sunita Harijan, addressing the challenges from her position as the president, raised the question, "If we do not have support from WOREC and CARE Nepal, how will the Girls' Rights Forum be sustained? I would like to pose this question to the chair and vice chair of the municipality."

To sum up, active engagement and networking have acted as catalysts in the transformation of adolescent girls, liberating them from the constraints of entrenched social norms through campaigns for social change and development. Although progress may be gradual, consistent efforts are dismantling these 'harmful social norms and values'. Simultaneously, the girls are experiencing personal growth alongside the localisation of the women's movement. When local authorities and provinces effectively contribute to campaigns and networking, the potential for impactful results in social change is significant.

¹⁵Women, culture and society. Eds.: Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere. Stanford University Press, Stanford, California: 1974. Pp: 1-16.



