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Identifying Paths to Successful Higher Education for Girls in the Solukhumbu District, Nepal

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Economic, social, cultural, and geographic barriers exist in rural Nepal that prevent many girls from successfully reaching higher levels of education. This research was conducted with the aim of identifying the enabling

environments and support systems that have allowed girls from the rural and mountainous Solukhumbu District of Nepal to successfully reach “college”-level education in class levels 11 and 12, despite the presence of extant barriers to their educational success. Results indicate that 4 primary factors create the foundation of educational success for girls: the motivation and determination of the girl to succeed in education; the support of the girls’ families and the commitment of the families to education; the egalitarian treatment of all students at all levels of school by teachers; and the financial and lodging support provided by the

Salleri Girls’ Hostel for Higher Education, run by a local nongovernmental organization (NGO). Results show success is achieved through financial support programs; family support, both in terms of motivation and encouragement and through reducing girls’ domestic and family care responsibilities; increasing awareness of the benefits of education in communities; and support offered by NGO programs. Recommendations for effective future initiatives to support girls’ education in the region include the establishment of more hostels for girls, offering financial support to families, and leading community awareness programs about education.

Keywords: Higher education for women; education barriers; school attendance; gender equality; education for all; NGOs; sustainable development; Himalaya.

Peer-reviewed: June 2019 **Accepted:** September 2019

Introduction

Supporting the education of girls in rural mountain areas is a critical element of sustainable mountain development (SMD) initiatives, and there are cyclical linkages between girls’ education and SMD. Alleviating barriers to girls’ education is an important step in fostering gender equality and women’s empowerment, influencing and supporting community-level SMD and stewardship of the natural environment (UNEP 2003, 2016; ICIMOD 2016). This imperative is particularly relevant in Nepal. Nepal’s School Sector Development Plan (SSDP) identifies gender as one factor causing inequitable access to education in the country, and explains there are “systematic barriers” to girls benefiting from education to the same extent as boys (Government of Nepal, Ministry of Education, 2016: 28, 33). While 96.2% of boys attend primary school and 74.2% of boys attend secondary school, the proportions are lower for girls: 91.4% attend primary school, and only 66% attend secondary school (UNICEF 2015). Literacy rates also indicate a gender discrepancy: 89% for males and 77% for females aged 15–24 years, and 71% for males and only 47% for females for all people aged 15 years and above (Education Policy and Data Center 2014).

The geographic, social, cultural, and educational conditions of rural Nepal warrant research related to

support structures that enable higher educational attainment for girls in these regions. Gaining a deeper understanding of the enabling environments, programs, and initiatives that have positive impacts upon girls’ educational attainment can provide positive and informative guidance to people working in the fields of SMD, rural development, and women’s empowerment (Figure 1).

Research related to girls’ education has increased in recent years and is gaining global support, emphasis, and attention. This is driven by several factors, including the aim of organizations, such as the United Nations (UN), to increase gender equality globally, often through education. The UN’s Sustainable Development Goals, adopted in 2015, include 2 goals that focus on education and women and girls explicitly. Goal 4 is to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all,” which connects directly with goal 5, to “achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls” (UN 2019). Other factors increasing the global attention paid to girls’ education include research that has identified linkages between gender equality, environmental sustainability, and sustainable development, and research showing that the increased participation of girls in school results in wide benefits to individuals and societies. Increasing a girl’s level of education increases the chance that she will marry later, have lower lifetime fertility, and have lower infant mortality

FIGURE 1 (A) Girls attend an outside lesson at a rural school in Basa, Solukhumbu, Nepal; (B) the Salleri Girls' Hostel for Higher Education, where 40 girls from rural and remote villages throughout the Solukhumbu District of Nepal live and study in grades 11 and 12. (Photos by Sally Wier)



rates, and also correlates to an increase in wages (Sibbons 1999; Shah and Shah 2012; UN 2015; Bhagavatheeswaran et al 2016).

Much research has identified barriers to girls' education in developing countries. Many of these barriers, relating to school, family, and community environments, are common across diverse cultures and countries (Bellow and King 1992; Khan 1992; Sibbons 1999; Somuncu 2006; Song et al 2006; McMahan et al 2011; Shah and Shah 2012; Warrington and Kiragu 2012; Putnick and Bornstein 2015; Bhagavatheeswaran et al 2016). However, few publications focus on identifying tangible solutions or courses of action to break down barriers to girls' education, or make tangible recommendations in this regard. The studies that do offer guidance on what initiatives have an impact are broad, general, and vague (Sibbons 1999; Shah and Shah 2012); individual studies cite a specific factor as making a key difference in enabling girls' education, but these studies are often countered by another that found the same factor had no influence (Bellow and King 1992; Khan 1992; Somuncu 2006; Song et al 2006; Kamanda et al 2016).

Consequently, the research reported here aims to shift away from the barrier-focused approach taken by previous researchers, and is designed to look at success stories in girls' education in a particular cultural context. This alternative approach is intended to identify common support structures that have proven effective in rural Nepal and thus to offer tangible guidance on the enabling school, family, or community environments that should be developed to increase girls' school enrollment, attendance, and level of achievement.

This article describes a project on success factors for girls' education in Solukhumbu, Nepal. Following the presentation of the methodology, the results are examined—using themes that emerged during the research—first according to responses from students, and then collectively using responses from students, teachers, parents, and nongovernmental organization (NGO) staff members. The article concludes with a discussion, conclusion, and recommendations.

Methodology

The study focused on female students at the Girls' Hostel for Higher Education in Salleri (henceforth “the Salleri Hostel”), run by the Nepal-based NGO The Small World (TSW). Salleri is the capital of Solukhumbu District. The 40 residents, from rural and remote villages throughout Solukhumbu, are in classes 11 and 12, referred to as “college.” More information about the residents is provided in Box 1.

Using a purposive sampling approach, all 40 girls answered short questionnaires designed to collect baseline data. Questions addressed topics such as the location of their home villages, the distances they had to travel to reach different levels of school, and their familial situation at home. From these responses, 11 girls, of diverse ethnic castes, were selected for in-depth interviews. They were from 3 village development committees (VDCs) (Taksindu, Basa,

BOX 1: Profile information for residents of the Girls' Hostel for Higher Education in Salleri

- Class levels attended: 11 and 12, referred to as “college” in Nepal.
- Age range of residents: 15–20 years, with most being 16 and 17 years.
- Services provided at the hostel: accommodation including shared bedrooms, a shared kitchen, shared toilet and shower rooms, community dance and meeting rooms, computer lab, courtyard, and volleyball court; tuition for school; school uniforms; books and school supplies; full-time residential supervision by a chaperone employed by the NGO The Small World.
- Items not covered by the hostel: food.
- Admission requirements: application to The Small World including information on family situation, economic status and demonstration of financial need, high school grades.

and Mukli), representing a range of geographic areas. Selection of these 11 girls was based primarily on the geographic location of their home VDCs. The 40 girls were residents of 15 VDCs. To allow the researcher to interview multiple girls and families about the economic, cultural, and geographic situations of a particular area, the 9 VDCs that were home to at least 3 girls were identified. Having multiple schoolgirl and family participants from the same VDC area allowed multiple perspectives to be collected about this area, giving data that could be cross-referenced. The 11 girls were interviewed by the researcher, working with a female translator. They subsequently visited the girls' home villages and conducted in-depth interviews with 8 sets of the girls' parents in their homes; 3 head teachers of schools the girls had formerly attended; the head teacher of a girls' college in Salleri; the head teacher of a school in Kanku VDC, where some of the Salleri girls had previously been students; and 3 staff members from The Small World, all lifelong residents of Solukhumbu.

After the 27 interviews had been completed, the English portions and translations of all interviews were transcribed verbatim from audio recordings. Data analysis followed an inductive grounded theory framework, which allowed themes to emerge from the interviews. Analysis began with manual open coding; during transcript review, emerging codes were noted in the margins of the transcripts. Once a list of open codes had been completed, they were grouped into themes through axial coding. As themes were further analyzed, overarching categories were determined through selective coding. These created the structure for thematic analysis of the enabling environments and support systems that influenced the educational success of the girls. Results in figures are drawn from the most frequent responses to questions. The results below are presented according to these themes.

Results

Profile of all 40 hostel residents

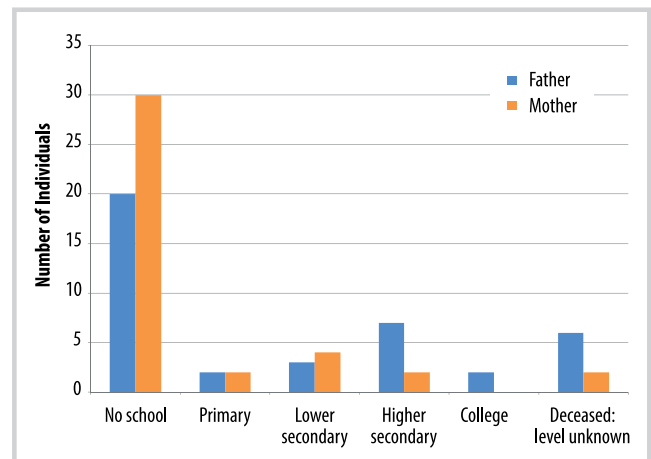
The girls' family sizes ranged from 2 to 10. All parents worked as farmers; some had additional occupations, including laborers at construction sites, porters, and hotel managers. The educational levels of the parents varied; most had received no schooling (Figure 2), and no mother had reached the same level of education as her daughter.

The distance to the closest available school increases with successive school level. Some girls had to walk only 5–15 minutes to primary and secondary schools; others had to walk for 2 or more hours to reach the closest school. All traveled to and from school by foot on dirt paths; most journeys involved significant gain or loss of elevation—in some cases, over 900 m—over poor, rocky trails. To reach the hostel in Salleri from their home village, 4 of the girls (10%) had to walk for half a day; 24 (60%) had to walk for a day; the remainder (30%) had to walk for up to 2 days.

In-depth interviews of 11 girls

Student and teacher gender balance in schools: All girls attended coeducational classes at primary, secondary, and college levels; in most, girls outnumbered boys. When asked the reason for this inequality, most respondents did not know, and they did not comment on how this fact influenced

FIGURE 2 Educational levels achieved by the parents of the 40 resident girls at the Salleri Hostel.



their school career. Two stated that it was because more girls than boys live in the vicinity; another reported that families give more priority to sons and send them to more developed areas, such as Kathmandu, for study. Across all levels of schools, there were fewer female teachers, usually by a wide margin. In general, female teachers were only present in primary school. With so few female teachers at secondary schools, many girls were never taught by them.

Influence of female teachers and menses: Four girls stated that they liked having female teachers and missed having them in secondary school. This related primarily to issues concerning menses and the girls' level of comfort in discussing these with their teachers. None of these girls, however, indicated that the lack of female teachers was a significant obstacle for them in their studies. Four girls explicitly said it made no difference to them whether they had female teachers or not. The girls were also asked directly about the impact of menses on their ability to study or to attend school. Despite common issues with inadequate toilet facilities, only 2 reported having to miss school during menses, and for only 2 days per month, similar to the findings of Oster and Thornton (2011).

Domestic roles and responsibilities: All girls were expected to help with regular household chores, such as cooking and washing dishes and clothes, from the time they were in primary school through the present. Half experienced notable challenges in completing their school assignments and studies because of these duties. When girls missed classes as a result, they would try to catch up by copying notes from friends or a teacher outside regular class time. Some girls, for example the eldest daughter in the family or a girl in a family with no living mother, had extra domestic responsibilities. All, however, reported that they found a way to manage their time, even if they could not study until after 10 pm. Only 1 girl was not required to work in the fields by her parents. She would sometimes help on Saturdays, the students' 1 day off each week; on other days, her father explicitly told her that she and her younger siblings should concentrate on their education full time. Even at the hostel, the girls are required to cook their own meals, shop for food, do their own laundry and dishes, and tend to the garden on the hostel property. However, the burden of these duties is lessened at the hostel

as the girls are only responsible for themselves and not for many family members.

Marriage norms: Despite a law that does not allow marriage before 20, 37% of girls in Nepal marry before they are 18, 10% before they are 15 (Human Rights Watch 2016). However, only 1 girl had experienced any familial pressure to be married at an early age, from extended relatives. On hearing of this, her parents firmly informed the relatives that it was not time for their daughter to be married and that she needed to continue her studies. None of the girls' sisters had been a part of a child marriage.

Physical infrastructure of schools: While half of the girls did not report any issues at their schools in terms of physical infrastructure, the others noted various discomforts or challenges. The most common was inadequate toilet facilities. Some toilets were dirty or lacked doors, but most often no water was available at the school, requiring children to walk to a community or home tap that was 5 or more minutes away. Also frequently mentioned were poor desks and benches in classrooms or lack of furniture, so students had to sit on the ground during lessons. Several girls mentioned tin roofs that caused classrooms to become very hot during sunny weather. Two reported holes in roofs that allowed rain to fall on students; even when classrooms were flooded, teachers continued to teach with the children sitting in water. The conditions reported by these girls are corroborated by the frequent references to poor school infrastructure and toilet facilities nationally in Nepal's SSDP (Government of Nepal, Ministry of Education, 2016). Such conditions negatively influenced some of the girls' educational experiences by causing them to miss portions of classes or to be in physical discomfort to a degree that sometimes caused distraction and inattention to lessons.

In-depth interviews of all 27 respondents

Attitudes toward education: All respondents were in favor of education and viewed it as a positive force. Teachers directly or indirectly indicated equal attitudes toward educating both boys and girls. The girls corroborated this, all reporting that they were treated the same as boys in their schools. All parents stated that boys and girls had equal rights regarding education. They also discussed why they supported the education of their daughters. While a few expressed general support for education, most offered more specific reasons, including wishes that their children could have a better life or job, the hope that they would not have to face the struggles the parents faced, the belief that educated people can do much more than uneducated people, and the wish for their daughters to be more confident. This widespread support was strong, even though most of the parents had not attended school. When asked how they developed such strong support for education without having experienced it personally, the parents often responded that it was simply how they felt. Only 1 identified a specific experience as influencing his view of education: working in India for several years, where he saw more widespread education and its benefits.

The respondents were also asked about their communities' attitudes toward education. Most respondents stated that all members of their communities felt education

was important, though 2 stated that community support was 50% and 2 that it was less than 50%.

Caste: Although the term "caste" is widely used in Nepal to simply refer to different ethnic groups and does not necessarily imply social standing or rank (Gray 2012), it does appear to play a role in community attitudes toward education and how girls are treated. The 40 girls at the Salleri Hostel represented 10 different castes (Sherpa, Rai, Tamang, Basnet, Gurung, Kulung, Magar, Karki, Thapa, and Bhujel). The 11 girls, along with their parents, teachers, and NGO staff who were interviewed in depth, represented 7 castes (Sherpa, Rai, Tamang, Basnet, Gurung, Katel, and Sharma). Several respondents from all groups discussed different attitudes toward girls' education among castes in the region: Sherpa and Rai. Several respondents described Sherpa people as generally having more financial resources than other castes, primarily due to their work in the booming tourism and trekking sector, as well as being recipients of significant aid from Sir Edmund Hillary's Himalayan Trust. They also reported that Sherpa people generally tend to place equal value on education for their sons and daughters; they tend to educate their children up to the college level, and then have their daughters marry and sons enter the trekking sector. Rai people are generally less financially well off and are therefore only able to send their children to school up to class 10. However, like Sherpa people, Rai people tend to treat boys and girls equally in terms of education.

Gender discrimination: When asked about gender discrimination toward education in communities, respondent groups were more divided in their responses. While half the respondents felt that treatment of girls and boys was equal, half felt that boys were given priority. Stated reasons included the practice of sending sons, but not daughters, to better schools in more developed areas, such as Salleri or Kathmandu; the expectation that girls would help at home; the assumption that girls will be sent to their husbands' homes and are not worth educating; and traditional views that education is bad for girls.

Cultural norms leading to discrimination against girls were mentioned by many respondents. For instance:

It is a social traditional belief from then to now that girls, they cannot do themselves. In an independent way. That they cannot be independent themselves. With this reason also they are just kept in the village for further work and their studies. They are not as clever and as active like boys who can go out of the village and they can do for themselves.

(Participant B, teacher)

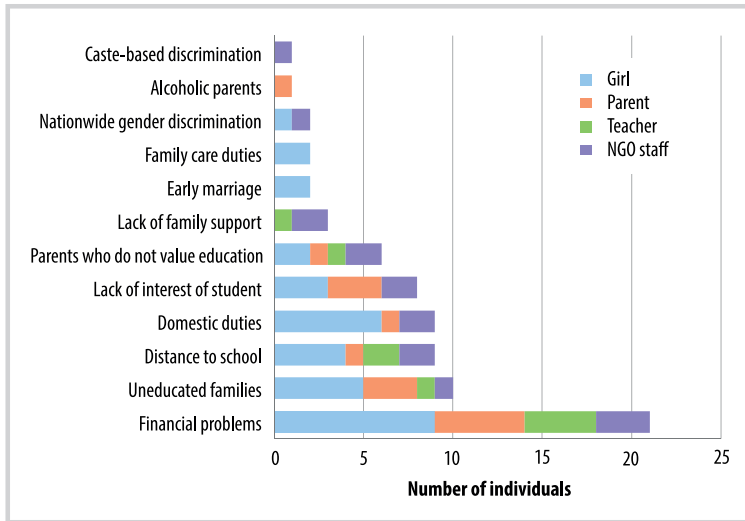
There are widespread assumptions that girls ought to work at home and in the fields, that they will marry early and leave their parents, that a husband's family is responsible for paying to educate a girl, and that educating females is not good:

And other things, in Nepal not freedom for women. Man is freedom. But woman is not freedom. This is not some area, one area, this is the rule of Nepal... This is the culture. The culture of Nepal.

(Participant C, NGO staff)

Respondents in this study did not demonstrate signs of the common gender discrimination across Nepal that they

FIGURE 3 Predominant obstacles to girls' education as identified by respondent groups.

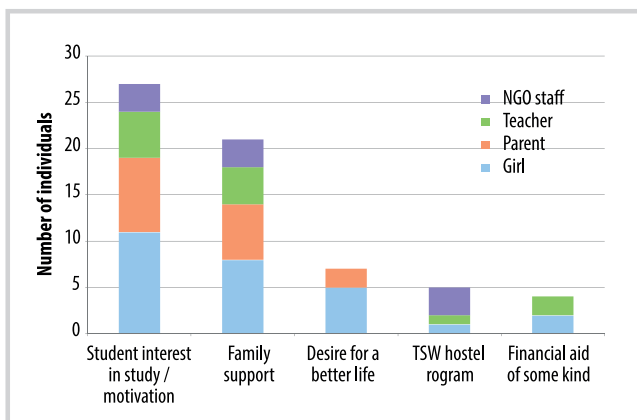


reported. Determining the cause for this difference between the respondents and Nepali society as a whole would have required more questioning and fell beyond the scope of this study.

Changes in attitudes toward education: Despite discriminatory cultural norms, 6 participants (22% of respondents) identified a cultural and community shift in attitudes toward girls' education across Solukhumbu that had begun 8 to 10 years ago, to give more importance to education both generally and to girls in particular. When asked about the catalyst for this shift, 4 responses were given: the generational effect of an increasingly educated population; an awareness program run by an NGO about education and its impacts; increased access to technology, television, radio, and other media in rural areas that show people other standards of living; and an increasing belief that, if they are educated, today's children may not have to face the struggles their parents faced.

Obstacles: The respondents were directly asked to discuss the primary obstacles that they, their female children, or their female students faced when trying to attend school, and those faced by other girls in their home communities. Additional comments about obstacles emerged in the

FIGURE 4 Perceived importance of factors influencing success as identified by respondent groups.



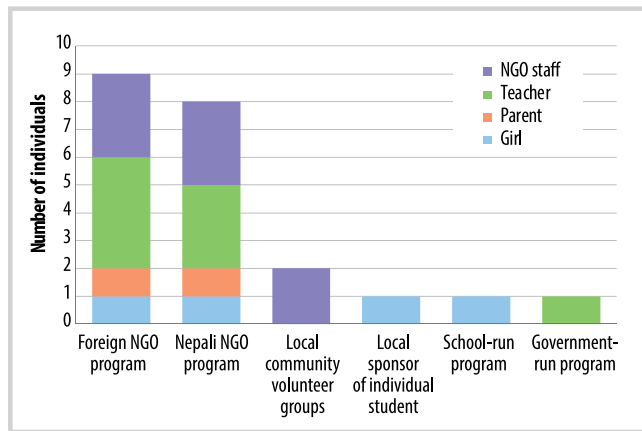
interviews. The experienced and perceived obstacles were coded by respondent group (Figure 3).

Four types of obstacles were identified by all respondent groups: financial problems, uneducated families, distance to school, and parents who do not value education. Financial problems were identified as the primary obstacle faced by girls across Solukhumbu in trying to obtain an education. This is corroborated by the fact that all parents had to take out loans to pay for their daughters' school fees. These were always provided by neighbors or relatives, as no national government, local VDC, or bank loans were available. Some girls received additional help with primary or secondary school fees through NGO scholarship programs or programs run by schools, which award students who place first or second in their level or have the best attendance record. However, these forms of financial aid are the exception rather than the rule.

In addition, girls, parents, and NGO staff all identified the lack of interest of other children in education as an obstacle. Teachers did not identify this as an issue, but it may be that students try to hide their disinterest from teachers, or that they may be less prone to discuss the issue.

Reasons for success: All respondents were directly asked to discuss the primary reasons that they, their female children, or their female students had successfully reached the college level of study. Additional views regarding support systems for success emerged during interviews. Across all respondent groups, the most important factors leading to educational success were identified as (1) the motivation and interest of the girls themselves and (2) the support of their families (Figure 4). The desire for a better life for themselves or for their children was explicitly expressed by 5 girls and 2 parents (26% of respondents); this may also be understood as a subfactor influencing why girls were personally motivated to succeed in school or why their parents were supportive of education. Other factors that were specifically mentioned were access to housing in the Salleri Hostel and financial aid. A key finding is that the success of these girls was not because of a lack, or removal, of obstacles, but *despite* obstacles. Working to address how girls and families approach and deal with obstacles to their education is just as important, if not

FIGURE 5 Relative proportions of existing positive-impact programs in the Solukhumbu District as identified by respondents.



more important, than removing the barriers themselves. Personal motivation is often key to success.

Existing positive-impact initiatives: The respondents were asked about programs in their communities that had a positive impact in supporting and facilitating education in general or education specifically for girls. Some respondents mentioned these programs in the context of other questions. Respondents identified 22 distinct programs in their communities that they felt made a tangible difference (Figure 5). Initiatives run by both domestic and foreign NGOs have had the most positive impact on facilitating educational opportunities, according to all respondent groups. Teachers and NGO staff gave more responses about positive-impact programs, possibly because of their professional roles and their more direct interaction with, or awareness of, programs aimed at facilitating education at a community level.

Recommendations for future positive-impact initiatives: Respondents were asked what types of projects, programs, or initiatives they believed would have the largest positive impact in supporting girls' education in their communities. Awareness or empowerment programs were by far most

frequently mentioned across all respondent groups (Figure 6). Respondents explained that these programs should inform local people about what education is, how it works, and what impact it can have, in order to convince families and community members that it is very important to send children to school. Regarding who was best suited to lead or run an awareness program of this kind, opinions differed. Responses included NGOs (whether Nepali or foreign), VDC staff, teachers, local women's groups, girls who have successfully achieved higher levels of education, or all educated people, whatever their gender or occupation. All respondent groups also identified financial support programs and hostels for schoolchildren as important. The fourth most mentioned action was to increase family support. Although this factor was mentioned only by girls and teachers, Figure 6 shows its importance as a critical element for success.

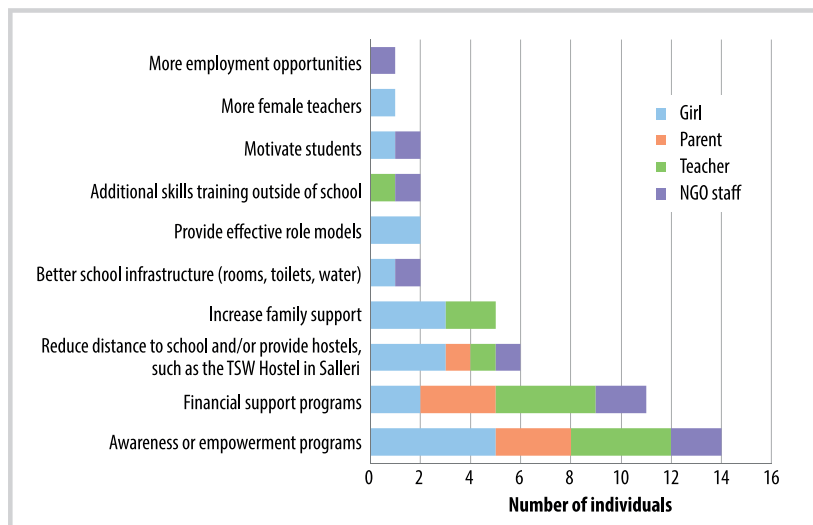
Discussion

Four key factors emerged as the foundation of the educational success for the girls studied:

- The motivation and determination of the girls to succeed in education;
- The support of the girls' families and their commitment to education;
- The egalitarian treatment of all students at all levels of school by teachers;
- The financial and lodging support provided by the Salleri Hostel.

The hostel is the easiest to assess in terms of its impact, how this is achieved, and how similar support structures might be replicated in Solukhumbu or beyond. The girls' hostel is the only one of the key factors that tangibly removes barriers between girls and their opportunity to participate in higher secondary education. It eliminates the obstacle of distance between a girl's home and college—otherwise a prohibitive circumstance due to the remote locations of the girls' home villages. The hostel also eliminates financial obstacles by providing lodging free of charge and covering

FIGURE 6 Relative proportions of recommended future positive-impact programs in the Solukhumbu District identified by respondents.



all school-related fees and expenses. Thus, the hostel directly addresses 2 of the primary obstacles (distance and financial problems) that face girls in Solukhumbu.

The other 3 key factors—motivation of the girls, family support, and teachers' egalitarian attitudes—are less tangible, as they relate to the attitudes and motivations of individuals. These factors are harder to address in concrete terms, which, in turn, makes recommendations more difficult. As previously suggested, these factors point to the finding that the success of the girls is not so much about removing barriers themselves, but about how girls and their families address the obstacles. New research is collecting data around these factors (USAID 2017); when available, the results may offer more tangible guidance in this context.

Mindsets and attitudes among the girls, parents, and teachers who gave high importance to education all clearly played significant roles in the endurance, tolerance, commitment, dedication, and determination to receive an education in the face of many obstacles. Just as it is difficult to quantify a quality such as determination or attitude toward education, it is also somewhat difficult to discern why these attitudes exist among the respondents.

For the teachers, it can be inferred that—due to their own educational backgrounds and professional roles—education is of critical importance. It is not surprising that teaching professionals support education and have more egalitarian and progressive attitudes relating to the rights and educational opportunities of both boys and girls.

For the girls, the results indicate that their determination to succeed in school comes from the support and positive messaging provided by their teachers and parents, as well as from somewhere inside themselves. How teachers support and encourage them can be understood, as mentioned above. How their parents support them through constant encouragement and financial support can also be understood. Where their own internal determination comes from, however, is less easy to assess.

For the parents, their belief in the importance of education for their daughters is demonstrated to the girls through acts such as always finding a way to obtain loans to pay school fees, despite living in poverty, and not allowing them to work so they can focus on their studies. Verbally, parents are supportive through direct positive messaging and encouragement regarding education. Why they continually provide these actions and words of encouragement, however, is less clear. One might expect that parents who received higher levels of education themselves and experienced its impacts in their own lives might be more adamant in their support of education. The parents of the girls in this study, however, do not represent that demographic. Less than half had received any education, and all still practice traditional subsistence farming as their primary occupation. This indicates that their determination to support education has an origin other than their own direct experience with education.

Despite attempts to probe for information regarding the source of their beliefs about the importance of education, many parents responded only that it was their personal interest and belief that school was important. Most parents clearly expressed the link between education and their desire for their girls to have better lives, but as to why they felt that education was the critical element that would allow their girls to achieve a better life, the only direct answer was

from one father who cited the experience of seeing the impact of education while working in India. Thus, the study revealed the critical role of parental attitudes toward education, but failed to specifically identify the most common or effective means of producing or cultivating such attitudes in parents, especially those who were uneducated. This is a clear opportunity for further exploration and research.

In relation to the Government of Nepal's SSDP—the country's guide for the education sector through 2023—this study both confirms some findings presented in the plan and offers guidance for addressing equitable access to education for all. This study corroborates findings in the SSDP, such as there being “a strong correlation between households' economic status and participation in schooling at secondary and higher secondary (grades 11 and 12) levels” and “that it is often difficult for poorer students to pursue further studies as secondary schools charge monthly fees in grades 11 and 12” (Government of Nepal, Ministry of Education, 2016: 11–12). Other barriers, including domestic duties and early marriage, are cited by the SSDP (Government of Nepal, Ministry of Education, 2016: 11–12) just as they were identified as issues in this study.

In terms of gender equality, the SSDP explains that the past 2 decades have seen a lot of emphasis on girls' education within the context of increasing access to education in Nepal and that gender parity has been achieved on a number of basic education indicators. However, it also asserts that “many differences remain with children receiving inequitable access to quality education due to gender” (Government of Nepal, Ministry of Education, 2016: 28).

The SSDP used the preceding School Sector Reform Plan (SSRP) for 2009–2016 as a point of departure for further work in the education sector, and the SSRP aimed to strengthen equity with reform that “will focus on girls and women and children from educationally deprived groups so that they will participate equally and attain equitable results” (Government of Nepal, Ministry of Education, 2016: 143). The newer SSDP departs from this approach and claims that the plan's equity strategy “does not consider girls or women a vulnerable or disadvantaged group” (Government of Nepal, Ministry of Education, 2016: 144). Though the plan's authors may wish to expand the definition and understanding of “gender” and how it influences all people in access to education, a shift from a specific focus on girls and women for equity work in the SSRP to stating that girls and women are not vulnerable or disadvantaged in the SSDP may be a large leap.

This is notable as the mission of the SSDP is to support the elevation of Nepal above the status of a least-developed country by 2022 and to reach the status of a middle-income country by 2030 (Government of Nepal, Ministry of Education, 2016: 15). In relation to achieving this status, the Nepal National Planning Commission has identified 7 main development goals to achieve the aim, one of which is “gender equality with conscious empowered women” (Government of Nepal, Ministry of Education, 2016: 20). This statement indicates that women are a key group to consider in reform.

The findings of the research presented here offer guidance on aspects influencing the successful educational attainment of girls in Nepal, and are relevant to the continuing education sector reform and development in the

country, whether the issues are specifically spelled out as being related to girls and women or more broadly under the topic of gender. Regardless of government definitions of gender, girls and women continue to need support in the educational sector, and the results presented here can offer insights into successful ways to help support more girls in equitable attainment of a quality education.

Conclusion

Previous research has shown that facilitating the education of girls has tangible benefits for individuals, communities, and societies, as well as supporting larger behaviors and movements such as stewardship of the natural environment and SMD. This study identifies the enabling environments and support structures that increase the participation of girls in education, complementing past research on barriers to their education across geographies and cultures. Based on the findings of this study, increasing the success of girls in higher education in remote rural areas requires a bundle of measures: the establishment of more hostels for girls, with all lodging and school-related costs covered; offering financial support to families to offset educational costs when sponsorships at hostels are not available; and community programs to increase awareness of the benefits of educating girls. In terms of delivery, in the specific context of Nepal, the SSDP mentions the need for public–private partnerships in secondary and tertiary education (Government of Nepal, Ministry of Education, 2016: 97). Such partnerships may also be relevant in other countries. These measures are essential in encouraging and supporting the key roles of families, in terms of both motivation and encouragement, and reducing girls' domestic and family care responsibilities. With its focus on success, the study is an important next step to further the global effort to address gender equality and the many facets of societies that benefit from this.

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