

ALiGN

Advancing Learning and
Innovation on Gender Norms



RESEARCH REPORT

‘Cultural norms are strong and will fight back’: narratives of change and challenges in achieving gender equality and women’s empowerment in Nepal

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Acronyms and abbreviations

ALIGN	Advancing Learning and Innovation on Gender Norms
CBS	Central Bureau of Statistics
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CSO	Civil society organisation
FCHV	Female community health volunteers
FEDO	Feminist Dalit Organisation
FGD	Focus group discussion
FWLD	Forum for Women, Law and Development
GBV	Gender-based violence
IDI	In-depth individual interview
IGI	Intergenerational interview

IOM	International Organization for Migration
IPWA	Inter Party Women’s Alliance
KII	Key informant interview
MP	Member of Parliament
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
NPC	National Planning Commission
ODI	Overseas Development Institute (UK)
SLC	School Leaving Certificate
SRH	Sexual and reproductive health
UML	United Marxist-Leninist
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
WHR	Women for Human Rights (Single Women’s Group)

Cover photo: Women at a meeting in Nepal. © Simone D. McCourtie / World Bank

Key messages

- Positive changes in discriminatory gender norms and practices in Nepal over the past 40 years or so have expanded options and improved capabilities for women and girls in critical domains.** These include: rising levels of education for girls as more parents see the value of educating daughters as well as sons and as more educational opportunities become available; greater voice for and acceptance of women in politics and public life; expanded economic opportunities for women, including in domains that were previously reserved for men; and significant improvements in reproductive health care and rights. There has also been some relaxation of norms around marriage, with greater flexibility in individual marriage arrangements and practices, and a slow erosion of restrictions on mobility that have characterised the lives of women and girls. Discrimination and stigmatisation against certain categories of women, such as widows, is slowly decreasing.
- This progress has been brought about through a combination of factors.** Socio-political movements striving for social equity and the drive for democracy in the 1990s served as a key stimulus and force for change. These movements aimed for broad-based societal transformation based on ideals of social equality and inclusion, within which women's specific collective efforts for gender equality have been couched. Through new civil society organisations (CSOs) and political processes, women activists have contributed to a gender-friendly Constitution and significant legal reform around women's rights, while women's political participation has been promoted and increased through quotas at all levels of government. Education and health services have expanded and become better quality and more gender-inclusive, contributing to the empowerment of more women and girls and facilitating the flow of information and awareness. For many of our study participants, the transition from a rural to urban environment coupled with higher education has also opened the door to expanded economic opportunities, increased autonomy, and a newfound exercise of individual agency. Supportive family members – both male and female – as well as mentors have also been critical in enabling girls and women to pursue and realise their rights and capabilities.
- Progress has, however, been uneven and partial, and significant gender disparities remain, partly due to discriminatory norms.** In spite of Nepal's many progressive laws and policies, implementation and enforcement of laws that protect women are weak, creating a 'disconnect' between national aspirations and local realities. Some categories of women, such as widows, continue to struggle for their rights, while others, such as minority women, face a double burden of discrimination based on caste or ethnicity and gender. Rural women and girls in many areas continue to suffer from heavy workloads, limited autonomy and lack of education. The intersectionality of women's lives creates a complex web of social and cultural expectations and obligations that make it hard to move forward in achieving full gender equality.

- The challenges that persist relate to ‘sticky’ norms around cultural concepts of ‘purity’ and ideals around women that are embedded in societal structures and institutions.** Some of these derive from deep-rooted attitudes and practices linked to the predominantly patriarchal social structures of Nepal, based on patrilineal inheritance, patrilocal residence, and ideological emphasis on the male child. Within such structures, women’s sexuality and social behaviour (such as dress, mobility, contacts with men) are still tightly controlled, as women are expected to uphold the family’s reputation. While individual women are able to negotiate around some of the injustices and limitations imposed by these discriminatory norms, many still struggle for equality as they work hard to fulfil both the changing expectations and demands of economic empowerment and their social responsibilities within the family and extended household. Women’s effective exercise of political power also remains a struggle at all levels.
- Strategic priorities for moving forward in achieving greater gender equality entail sustained, integrated and locally tailored action on a number of fronts.** The way forward requires continued, broad-based efforts around social mobilisation and awareness-raising, to try to retain and further the momentum towards equality and inclusion created by the social movements of the 1990s. Rights must be further safeguarded in law, and there needs to be much stronger attention to the implementation and enactment of laws and policies on the ground. The continued expansion of quality education is a key priority, along with the equitable promotion of economic opportunities. Integrated development approaches are critical to moving the agenda forward, since women’s empowerment is a complex whole with intertwining social, economic and political dimensions. And finally, given both the diversity of socio-cultural settings and structures as well as the disparities that mark women’s status and development in Nepal, efforts to deliver transformative change must be based on differentiated, context-specific development approaches that start from the bottom-up and take into account women’s own voices and priorities.

Introduction

Study background

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

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

ALIGN defines gender norms as the implicit, informal rules around the behaviour of women and men, and boys and girls, which most people accept and follow. They are influenced by belief systems, economic contexts, and sometimes by the perceived rewards and sanctions for adherence or deviation. Gender norms often reflect and reinforce unequal gender relations – usually to the disadvantage of women and girls and men and boys who do not conform to the prevailing ideals. As norms are embedded in formal and informal institutions, and produced and reproduced through social interaction, change can only come about when enough people choose to act (or are compelled to act) in a different way, creating a new norm.

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

Research in Nepal

Fieldwork in Nepal was undertaken in Kathmandu over a two-week period in November 2018, with 51 study participants (43 women and 8 young men). In addition to a literature review on the history of women's movements and gender equality issues in Nepal, the study drew on a variety of qualitative research methods to investigate norms and how they have changed over recent generations. These methods included: 18 in-depth individual interviews (IDIs); four intergenerational interviews (IGIs) with grandmothers, mothers and daughters or daughters-in-law; four small group interviews (with minority ward representatives, health workers,

researchers and civil society activists); one focus group discussion (FGD) with a mixed group of MA (Master of Arts) students; and one key informant interview (KII) with a university gender studies expert. Participants were asked about their own experiences of gender norms over their life course as well as their perceptions of broader changes, progress and constraints over time in gender equality and women's empowerment.

Study participants ranged in age from 23 years to 89 years. Participants were purposively identified and selected on the basis of their engagement in various sectors linked with women's rights and development (including from diverse political parties, CSOs and government departments) as well as the private sector, and on the diversity of their experiences of gender norms based on age, caste and ethnicity, religion, and region of origin. As our study focused on the views and experiences of educated women currently living in the capital, the sample was intentionally restricted to Kathmandu and surrounding areas, although many of the research participants were either from other regions of the country or have worked in other regions and had experiences to recount from those areas.

It is acknowledged that the experiences, analyses and perceptions that form the basis of the findings of this report remain partial, and are not intended as representations of all Nepali women. Nor does the report pretend to offer in-depth analysis of the complex socio-cultural and political forces that combine in different ways to shape experiences of gender and its intersectionality in Nepal. The findings are rather meant to be illuminative only and – as with the study itself – are offered here as a means of giving voice to individual women's experiences and insights into the gendered realities that they have encountered and the changes that they perceive.

National context

Geographic and cultural diversity, alongside recent political and social change, have greatly shaped the experiences of women and girls and the ways in which they are able to navigate gender norms in Nepal. With over 126 castes and ethnicities, its population is characterised by significant differences in livelihoods, socioeconomic conditions and historical development patterns as well as in customs and social norms. Social structure is marked by a caste system, with four major castes. Hinduism is the predominate religion, followed by Buddhism, with minorities of Christians and Muslims. A number of indigenous groups are animist rather than mainstream Hindu (Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), 2012; Government of Nepal website, n.d.). The government, under the Constitution of 2015, is a federal republic, formed after social movements in the 1990s overthrew the former monarchy. Predominantly rural, Nepal's economy relies heavily on agriculture, as well as remittances from predominantly male migrants. While the poverty rate has reduced significantly in recent years as a result of concerted development efforts, a quarter of the population still lives below the poverty line (National Planning Commission (NPC), 2018; Ministry of Finance, 2017).

The Nepal government has demonstrated commitment to promoting gender equality and women's empowerment in recent times, particularly since the advent of democracy. (There had been earlier breakthroughs though, such as the election in 1959 of the first female Member of Parliament, later to become the country's first female Minister.) Women were especially active

in the social movements of the 1990s (Yadav, 2017; Mawby and Applebaum, 2018) and have gained greater political representation through a quota system at different levels of government. The Constitution (2015) guarantees 41% of women's representation in local government and 33% in Parliament, government offices and political parties (Limbu, 2018). Successive national development plans have recognised gender equality as critical to poverty reduction (Upreti et al., 2010).

Legal reform has been a key thrust in efforts to promote gender equality, and numerous laws have been enacted for the protection of women's rights. Nepal ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1991 (CEDAW Shadow Report Preparation Committee, 2016). The adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action in 1995 was another important milestone, following which Nepal established a separate ministry for women, now the Ministry of Women, Children and Senior Citizens (Beyond Beijing Committee, 2017). A number of CSOs have been created to promote and safeguard women's human rights, and a coalition formed to pursue a common platform for women (Forum for Women, Law and Development (FWLD) website; Women for Human Rights (WHR) website; Inter Party Women's Alliance (IPWA), n.d.). Most indicators of women's well-being demonstrate significant improvements in sexual and reproductive health (SRH) and rights, education, economic empowerment, and protection (Ministry of Health et al., 2017; Ministry of Population and Environment, 2017), with sectoral programmes in place to further these gains.

Nevertheless, significant challenges remain for women and girls. Despite progressive laws and policies, implementation and enforcement are weak, and progress has been uneven across the country's different geographic and social groupings. Patterns of exclusion and inclusion are often correlated with demographic, socioeconomic and cultural background – with poor women in rural zones, women of specific castes, and vulnerable groups such as widows among the most disadvantaged and marginalised groups (Haug and Aasland, 2015; Bennett et al., 2013; Ghimire and Samuels, 2014; Acharya et al., 2010; WHR website). Girls' education is still limited in some areas by the unequal division of labour within the household as well as early marriage, which causes dropouts as girls make the transition from primary to secondary schooling (Center for Reproductive Rights, 2016; Ghimire and Samuels, 2014). Though many harmful and discriminatory practices have been outlawed, some persist in different parts of the country, including *chhaupadi* (whereby menstruating girls and women have to stay in a separate hut), accusations of witchcraft, and the practice of polygyny in different forms while some women continue to suffer from lack of awareness and autonomy in reproductive health (CARE, 2015; Gurung, 2016; NPC, 2018; Ministry of Health and Population et al., 2012). Women's economic empowerment is hindered partly by their dual responsibilities inside and outside of the household; partly by gender disparities in access to land and other resources (in spite of recent laws on gender-equal inheritance rights); and partly due to restrictions on their mobility that prevent them from benefiting from economic opportunities (Sharma and Rasaili, 2016; International Organization for Migration (IOM), 2016; National Planning Commission, 2018). Women and girls are also disadvantaged by different forms of gender-based violence (Ministry of Health et al., 2017), while access to justice remains limited due to a variety of constraints (National Judiciary Academy, 2016; United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2018a).

Table 1. Overview of progress and constraints in gender equality and women's empowerment in Nepal

Progress	Ongoing constraints
Gender equality promoted through extensive legal reforms including the 11 th amendment of the National Code (2002); Gender Equality Act (2005); Constitution (2015); revisions of the Civil and Penal Codes (2017); and enactment of other gender-specific laws and safeguards including around gender-based violence	Gaps remain in some laws and implementation on the ground is often weak. Gender-based violence continues, with numerous social, economic and geographical barriers hindering access to justice
Political participation and representation of women promoted through a quota system at different levels. Women now make up a third of all Members of Parliament (MPs) and 40% of local government; the current head of state is a woman; and the proportion of women in civil and security services has doubled over the past decade	Party leadership remains largely male-dominated; women are sometimes restricted to reserved rather than open seats in government; and spaces for the nurturing of leadership skills among girls and young women are limited
Expanded education and rising literacy rates among men and women, with girls surpassing boys in net attendance rates at primary and secondary school	Significant disparities remain in girls' access to and parental investment in education; girls largely go to lesser-quality government-run schools while boys are sent to private schools; dropouts, particularly at secondary level, remain high due to household work responsibilities and (in some areas) early marriage; higher education remains a challenge for many due to parental underinvestment and restrictions on mobility outside the home
SRH rights and services have improved significantly, with more babies being delivered in health facilities and expanded access to contraceptives contributing to greater control over fertility and smaller average family size	Services and information remain weak in some areas while various taboos, cultural barriers and lack of awareness or autonomy negatively impact women's reproductive health
Women are participating in the economy in ever greater numbers, supported by a number of laws, policies and programmes	Women's economic empowerment is still hindered by numerous factors: patterns of male inheritance, which limit women's access to land and other resources; employment preferences for men; and restrictions on women's and girls' autonomy and mobility. Women remain concentrated in informal or part-time work and subsistence agriculture, with relatively few women in managerial positions

Sources: FWLD, 2002; Nepal Law Commission, 2007; 2008; 2009; 2018; College of Development Studies of Nepal, 2013; CEDAW Shadow Report Preparation Committee, 2016; 2018; CBS, 2017, 2018; Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2017; CBS and UNDP, 2016; Ministry of Population and Environment, 2017; Ministry of Health et al., 2017; Ghimire et al., 2013; IPWA, n.d.; Presler-Marshall, 2017; Samuels et al., 2017; Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), 2019; International Land Coalition, n.d.

Narratives of growing up and coming of age

Reflecting on childhood experiences

Narratives of childhood and growing up captured in our interviews reveal a diversity of experiences, varying by region, urban or rural setting, caste or ethnicity, class, level of parents' education, and age, but also by personal circumstances and individual character. A number of our participants were born in rural villages across the country and only moved to Kathmandu for studies, for work, or to accompany husbands. While they have thus experienced both rural and urban realities, their early lives were marked by conditions in their rural areas. Others were born and grew up in Kathmandu. Some study participants reported that they felt cherished at home and valued equally with their brothers; others found that their brothers were given more freedom, personal mobility and certain advantages – for example, in access to education or in ceremonies (see Box 1).

Box 1. Encountering gender norms during childhood in different settings

- **One woman in her 50s** from central Terai reported that her awareness of gender discrimination was sparked at an early age in her traditional Hill Brahmin family when she saw that her brothers were allowed to go out to play after school while she had to stay at home to help her mother. She decided to study law to determine if it was just at the household level where such discrimination took place or if it was also enshrined in law.
- **A woman in her 40s** grew up as the eldest of three daughters in a village in eastern Terai to Brahmin parents who were both school teachers and very religious. She was not aware of gender discrimination while growing up, though on later reflection she can recall some discriminatory incidents. For example, while her parents never voiced regret for having only daughters, her mother told her much later that she had once suggested to her father that he take on another wife to try for a son. Her father, however, did not accept this.
- **A woman in her 40s** grew up as the eldest of three daughters in a village in eastern Terai to Brahmin parents who were both school teachers and very religious. She was not aware of gender discrimination while growing up, though on later reflection she can recall some discriminatory incidents. For example, while her parents never voiced regret for having only daughters, her mother told her much later that she had once suggested to her father that he take on another wife to try for a son. Her father, however, did not accept this.
- **A woman in her late 30s** from Kathmandu reported that her Newar father was 'stereotypical' around gender norms – for example, requiring that his daughters come home earlier than his son; insisting that the son should eat more and would be the only one to inherit; and scolding her if she beat her brother. Her mother, a 'progressive' woman, advocated gender equality for her children. However, while her mother had strong views on many things – particularly girls' education – she also acquiesced to a more traditional division of labour within the household. Both this woman's parents

had full-time jobs outside of the home, but ‘When they returned in the evening my father would just sit down to have a drink, while my mother did all of the housework’.

- **A woman in her 30s** from Kathmandu reported that as a girl, she just thought that working in the kitchen, washing clothes, etc. was normal – this was how they were brought up. She was the only daughter in her Tamang family, with one older brother and one younger brother, and did not perceive any son preference on the part of her parents. At the time she did not think it was discriminatory that her brothers were out playing football while she was doing housework. Nor did she find it unusual for her older brother to be very strict/protective of her – for example, not letting her come into the room when he had friends visiting.
- **Another woman in her 30s** from Kathmandu reported that there was no discrimination in her Newar home and her parents never made either her or her sister feel that they were lacking in any way. But because son preference is still prevalent in her community, relatives would taunt her parents – particularly her mother – about not having sons. (In Nepali culture, sons are deemed important for many reasons, including in Hindu ceremonial functions such as Bhai Tika where girls apply tika (red powder or paste considered holy) to their brothers’ foreheads.
- **Younger university students in their 20s** pick up on the idea that boys are more valued: both because they are expected to be the economic supporter of the household while girls will eventually marry and move away, but also because of ideological beliefs. For example: ‘In Hindu culture, only a son can open the door of heaven for the mother and father’. There were, however, some examples where daughters performed the ritual in the absence of sons. This was the case with some of our participants, including two students in the group, one of whom said that she had no brothers to perform the funeral rites for her Hindu Newar father and ‘had to fight with my cousins and others’ to perform these myself. Other students noted that even when the family would like to relax gender norms around traditional and ritual practices, women themselves may object, one student citing his grandmother, who insists on fasting for the long life of her husband: ‘She is old and frail now and still wants to fast. My grandfather scolds her but she insists.’

In-depth interviews (IDIs) and intergenerational interviews (IGIs) with women of different ages and backgrounds

Experiencing adolescence

Many of our study participants described adolescence as a time when they began to experience stronger gender differentiation and expectations. These were manifested particularly in greater restrictions on unsupervised movement; admonishments to abstain from sports and act like ‘ladies’; reduced contacts (for some) with boys; and the inculcation of beliefs and practices around menstruation as something that requires special acts of purification (Box 2).

Box 2. Adolescence and discriminatory gender norms

- **One woman in her 40s** recalled that when she was in 8th grade, her mother called her in when she was playing football to tell her that now she was big she should not play with boys anymore. When she began menstruating, she knew that she was not allowed to touch certain things in the kitchen, as well as water and statues of the gods. She did not feel that this was because she was considered impure, but just accepted it as part of their religion.
- **A woman reported** that it was during adolescence that she began to experience some of the first gender-specific restrictions imposed by social norms. These struck her as confusing, particularly because she was shuttling between the home of her aunts (who were less educated than her mother and therefore more conservative) and her own home. At around the age of 10 or 11, for example, her breasts had started to grow and one day when she was skipping rope with a t-shirt on, her aunt came to admonish her, and thereafter she could no longer jump rope. With the onset of menstruation at age 13, her aunts told her she could no longer sit with boys – if so, she would get pregnant. So, she explained, from that point on she was scared around boys and did not really understand the mechanics of pregnancy.
- **A woman in her 40s** took up martial arts as a girl – ‘to get all my energy out’ – encouraged in this by her uncle who convinced her father to let her enrol. Her father had initially enrolled only her brother and had been opposed to her joining, saying ‘This is not for girls.’ When she joined anyway, he told her that she was transgressing their boundaries. He also told her mother – who supported her, that she was foolish and ‘spoiling’ their daughter.
- **An older woman** studied only up to grade 3 when her father stopped her education because she had started menstruation. A girl who was menstruating was considered dirty and could not mingle with others or touch other things. Besides, it was felt at the time that when a girl reached menarche (the first occurrence of menstruation), it was time for her to be married.
- **A woman in her 30s**, growing up as a girl, recalled that her relatives said she was not allowed to wear certain clothes. But she loved to dance and was active in ceremonies, so her relatives said she did not have a good character and might elope. People used to tell the girl’s mother that her daughter should not be allowed so much freedom as she would go out and have a love affair.
- **One 25-year-old woman** was somewhat of a tomboy and preferred playing with the boys to playing with the girls. She only felt this to be a problem when she came back to visit her aunt, who would always admonish her to behave more decorously – to speak softly, not to be so straightforward, etc. They wanted her to be like the other girls, also in terms of dress. She preferred pants (trousers), but they wanted her to dress like the other girls.
- **Younger women university students in their 20s** often lamented what they feel are over-protective parents who limit their mobility and autonomy, explaining that: *It is culture and tradition that is making her parents behave that way, and this is deeply rooted*’ but insisting that *‘Our studies of gender issues have shown that this is not right and we should therefore fight for our rights’*. Some felt that parental

attitudes change once their daughters start earning money. As one participant said: *'With independence, my parents' attitude has changed and now they listen to me even more than to my brother and have begun to think that it is their daughter who will look out for them in their old age, while they are not so sure about their son!'*

IDIs, IGIs and focus group discussion (FGD) with women of different ages and backgrounds

Accessing education

With the exception of some of the older women in our intergenerational interviews, and one woman from the mountains, our study participants had all benefited from the expansion in educational opportunities. This reflects both the purposive nature of our study sample, with participants drawn primarily from the educated 'elite', but also the greater opportunities that were becoming available at the time for girls and boys alike. Some participants reported that their parents had instilled in them the value of education as they grew up. Others reported having to withstand social pressures pushing them towards early marriage and fight for their right to education on an equal par with their brothers. Some participants recounted that they knew families where sons were sent to the more prestigious English-medium private schools, while daughters were enrolled in lower-quality government schools – often subsequently dropping out early for marriage. But this had not been the case for most of our study participants who had seen for themselves the emancipatory power of quality education at higher and higher levels and negotiated within their families around ways to attain this (See Box 3).

At higher stages of education in particular – both secondary and tertiary – this often involved negotiations around the timing and circumstances of marriage, with some young women insisting that they be allowed to continue studying after marriage before accepting a marriage proposal. Accessing higher education at the time most of our participants were growing up was not always easy; universities were only available in the city, and unless one had relatives there, this presented problems. Obstacles arose from both economic factors (the need for rent/subsistence) and gender issues (families being protective of girls and wanting to guard them for marriage).

Box 3. Different experiences in accessing educational opportunities

Forced to drop out of school at an early age:

- **A woman in her 50s** from the Sherpa community spent 13 years in her home village at the 'Gateway to Mount Everest' in a family of seven children – four boys and three girls. Her father was a mountain guide, now retired; her mother was a housewife. Her family had terraced farmland on which they grew potatoes and maize. At the age of 6 or 7 she was thrilled when her parents sent her to the village school along with her brothers and cousins; but they pulled her out after only 4 or 5 months as her

mother's aunt was cautioning that only boys should go to school – girls would anyway only be working in the house and getting married later. As she was the eldest in her family, her labour was needed at home, so her mother told her she had to stay home from school and sent her out to gather water, wood, etc. She felt this was unfair so for a week or so she would go out to the fields with the doko (carrying basket) on her head but dump it along the way and run to school where she would play card games to earn money for food for lunch (potatoes) – hiding the cards in a niche in the wall so the teacher would not see. At the end of the school day she would run back to retrieve the doko, trying to disguise the fact that she had not worked. But she was discovered and had to stop attending school to work on the farm.

Finding allies to support schooling and in turn supporting others

- **A woman in her 40s** from the mid-western hills, the eldest of five children, reported that her interest in education had been sparked at an early age from an FM radio programme promoting girls' empowerment. According to common practice among her Brahmin hill family, girls should not have too much schooling, and her own parents did not want her to go to school. But her father's elder brother had a son working abroad and when he came back to the village and saw that she was 6 or 7 and still not in school, he convinced her parents that it was important for her to get an education, so they agreed, despite their wishes. She lived in a very remote village and had to walk up and down hills to get to the school, which was about an hour away by foot. She would finish all of her household chores at home first. She was a good student and after 6th grade, when her parents wanted to pull her out of school, her teachers convinced them to let her stay and she obtained a government scholarship that paid her fees.

After 10th grade, she taught in a small school for a few years (earning 900 rupees a month) and took responsibility for her younger siblings, using it to pay for their upkeep. She thus showed that she could take on responsibilities and earn and do good work. Her parents at that point realised the importance of education and thereafter – thanks to her example as a role model – her sisters as well as her female cousins in the extended family were all able to go to school. After her parents died when she was 19, she took on full responsibility for her family – supporting her siblings in their education. Then the government provided her with an opportunity to do a technical course as a community medical auxiliary and she continued as well on the academic side to grade 12, focusing on business.

Encouraged by supportive parents

- **A woman in her 40s** from the western hills grew up in a loving Brahmin family where she felt no gender discrimination from her parents: in fact, as their only daughter, with one older and one younger brother, she was if anything the one who received the more favoured treatment by her parents, who gave her a lot of trust and responsibility. Her father – a headteacher in the village – was very interested in education and encouraged her also to be a role model for other children in the village. She finished her 10th grade School Leaving Certificate (SLC) in the village (only the second batch of SLCs there at the time) and moved to Kathmandu to continue her studies as a health assistant, later pursuing an MA in business.

- **A woman now approaching 40** grew up in the more rural area of Kathmandu where her Newar family owned a farm and combined this with professional activities. Her mother, whom she describes as a 'feminist' from a Brahmin family who valued education, had no hesitation in enrolling her daughter in a prestigious English-medium private school while retaining her son at a government school because her daughter was harder-working. Her mother had to stand up to her father in this decision as the English-medium school was some distance from the house and therefore their daughter had to stay during the week with her aunt and cousins who lived nearer to the school.
- **A woman in her 30s** growing up in a Newar family in Kathmandu reported that education was prioritised for both herself and her sister – the only two children in the family. Both were sent to good English-medium community schools. Her mother greatly encouraged her daughters to do well at school and to go as far as possible, as she herself had been denied this opportunity. She told them that she would not give them any dowry for marriage other than their schooling/education, saying '*This is your dowry*'.

Holding out and negotiating for higher levels of education

- **A woman now in her 50s** from the eastern hills stayed with her extended family who served as her guardian, when she first came to Kathmandu for her studies, but after a year she moved out to live on her own. This, she explained, was because of the difficulties of living together – crowded conditions, money issues, etc. The choice was either returning home or trying to stay on her own. So she chose the latter and took a small job to sustain herself during her studies. Back in the village, however, people started pressuring her father, asking: '*Why are you letting your daughter stay alone in the city?*' There was also gossiping that she would run away with a boy, so she committed to never entering into a love match. She was 20 or 21 at the time. Her father, as a teacher, understood the value of education, and wanted his daughter to learn, but was beginning to worry about issues of dowry and suitable marriage arrangements for his three daughters as well as the four daughters of her mother's eldest sister. Her mother pushed her to succeed, saying that if she failed, she would have to leave her studies. She eventually married just before finishing her degree in 1989/90 at the age of 24, and then passed the civil service exam for government work.
- **A woman in her 50s** from a traditional hill Brahmin family in Terai was determined to go to college even though there was no college in her village; the closest one was about an hour away. Her parents at first refused to send her, so she went on a 'pretend' hunger strike (eating only in secret) and crying every day until they relented. She was one of the few girls in her circle who felt outrage at gender discrimination; most of her other friends simply accepted it as '*normal*' and instead of going on to study got married between 18 and 20 years. She herself went to Kathmandu for her university degree – planning to stay with her elder brother, but just as she was arriving, he was posted to a job outside the city, so she had to live on her own. Her parents were upset, but by that time they could say nothing more about it. She later went on to do a law degree.
- **A woman approaching 50** from eastern Terai reported that her Madhesi family was part of a community where norms for girls are very stringent. When she went to India to further her studies after attaining her School Leaving Certificate (SLC), her neighbours and relatives were all

questioning the wisdom of this, saying that as a girl she would get 'spoiled' there (that is, engage in love affairs). But her father held strong. She was married during her last year of her degree studies to a man who accepted her demand that he let her study as much as possible – something that she was supported in by her father-in-law. She reports that she underwent a lot of pressure and 'torture', with people saying that she should not go onto college. The neighbours were gossiping and continuously asking her husband and his family, 'Why are you letting her study like this? But she persevered and eventually earned her PhD.

Experiencing gender differences within school

- **One woman in her 30s** from Kathmandu who had attended a mixed English-medium school, reported that if you were a good student – as she was – you were treated well whether you were a girl or a boy. There were, however, different 'do's and don'ts' for girls and boys – boys could jump over the fence, for example, and would regularly take up all of the sports equipment for recreation, leaving girls with games such as Ludo! The teachers in general also had different behavioural expectations for girls and boys, considering boys to be more rambunctious, for example.
- **One woman in her 40s** who went to a private English-medium school in Terai reported that the teachers there did not discriminate between boys and girls in sports; however, boys would take the sports equipment before the girls and hence the girls would have only 'leftovers' to play with.

IDs, IGIs and FGDs with women of different ages and backgrounds

Growing up into political activism

Some women grew up at a time of considerable political unrest and social uprisings (from the 1990s to the 2000s), which forged the early roots of political activism (see Box 4). A number of our participants grew up in villages marked by intensive political activity, both leading up to and continuing during the Maoist movement of 1996–2006 and, in this context, became aware of gender and other inequalities and committed to fighting against these. The early lives of these participants were marked directly by the ideologies of social transformation prevalent at that time, the forms of collective organisation developed to promote these, and role models who exemplified devotion to a cause. The vision of a more equal society would also mark the broader national context and normative environment as the multi-party democratic system began to develop and solidify.

Box 4. Growing up into political activism

The coming of age of a Maoist activist

- **A woman in her 40s** grew up in a hill district village where many people in the community devalued education for girls and considered women 'second class'. They would not bother to send their daughters to school, believing that they would just get married and be taken care of by the husband's

family and would not be moving into careers that required education. There was also the fear that sending girls to school would 'spoil' them – leading them into promiscuity. *'The work of girls was not seen as studying, but of staying home. Studying was only for the big jobs that were the ones requiring going out – and those were for men. So there were many girls of my age who didn't go to school – they had to stay home on the farm.'* This was not the case for this interviewee, however, in her Brahmin family, as her uncle was headteacher at the school and encouraged her parents to send both her and her sister and brothers to school. It was a mixed school but with mostly boys in attendance. The school principal was a well-known anti-Monarchist communist leader (who later turned Maoist) and her uncle was too, so her family's household used to be the centre of political activities and debates at the time, with revolutionary songs and slogans that greatly attracted her.

As she grew up in that environment, she learned from the political discussions and the songs that women were oppressed by society and not treated well and that *'we needed to fight'*. She also began to observe more things around her. Her father's sister, for example, had been married at the age of 5 and widowed by 11 and could never wear red again, could not eat the things she wanted to, could not get married, and could never know what having one's own family was. She was also accused of being a witch. Our interviewee reported thinking, often, *'Was this fair?'*

Not all of her school mates were drawn in – most were just studying for its sake, saying they needed to focus on studies to become *'thulomanche'* – a 'renowned person' with a job. Others were not interested in anything at school so did not even attend. But she started her political life in grades 4 and 5. In grade 6 she joined the student union and in grade 10 she was already going around giving speeches, attending rallies with her uncle. Her uncle would be arrested from time to time and she and other students would run after them to ask for them to be released. The police would sometimes even go after the students. This was the start of her continued activist work, for which she ultimately paid a high price (see later Box 8).

The coming of age of a Marxist activist

- **A woman in her 30s** from an eastern hill district grew up as the eldest in a Chhetri family of four (two boys and two girls), with very supportive parents. Her father was a teacher in high school and wanted his daughter to be different – *'not to conform to the regular framework of other girls'*. Her mother was also active in the social sector and after one visit to Kathmandu was inspired by seeing a policewoman riding a horse. She came home and said, *'I want my daughter to be different, like the traffic police officer'*, but her father said, *'But why traffic police – better to be a lawyer!'* So her passion from an early age was to go into law.

The area where she grew up was heavily affected by the Maoist uprising during her adolescence, with occasional incursions into her village. The main difference between the Maoists and the Marxist-Leninists lay in their different models of revolution – violence vs peaceful persuasion. She had started her political work as a high school student in the student wing of the United Marxist-Leninist Party (UML) – the All Nepal National Free Student Union. UML had a strategy of picking up the best students from schools for extra-curricular activities that drew them in. She was attracted mostly by the activities (debates, competitions, get-togethers) and not so much at the time by the ideologies. Only slowly, when she gained more contact with senior leadership in Communist Party meetings, did she learn about other things. She was the chair of the student union, then became chair of the district for

this. Her parents feared for her safety because Maoists would often target individuals from other parties, so she completed her high school and intermediate education in the nearby district capital and thereafter came to Kathmandu for her degree and law studies.

IDIs, women political activists

Narratives of marriage and family

Choice of marriage partner

The formal and informal rules regarding marriage in Nepal vary significantly between regions, ethnic groups and castes. People commonly look within their socioeconomic group, caste or ethnic group for prospective marriage partners and there was a continued norm/tradition of arranged marriages among our study participants, wherein marriage partners were chosen by the family for sons and daughters alike. There were, however, also cases of 'love marriages', which are said to be growing in acceptability, as well as a few examples of 'elopement' (including some inter-caste marriages). The experiences of our study participants illustrate all of these patterns, which reflect deeply rooted gender norms in society. Due to the limited and selective nature of our study sample, we cannot draw any firm conclusions on patterns or trends over time in normative frameworks around the choice of marriage partner, but highlight below the range of individual women's experiences of such norms.

Respecting norms for arranged marriage

A number of our study participants – both young and old – had arranged marriages. This has been an established practice among most groups for generations, serving to preserve patterns of caste or ethnic endogamy and ensuring 'a good match' in terms of security for the girl linked to the future husband's family background, education or job prospects. In total, 13 of the married women we interviewed had had an arranged marriage; these women ranged in age from 25 to 89 years and cut across urban/rural distinctions and social categories.

Prior to their marriage, some had known their prospective husbands as part of the extended family or as classmates; but others did not meet their spouse until the marriage arrangements had been started. Factors contributing to their acceptance of such marriages varied but included: the force of tradition; ingrained respect for parents and faith in their good judgement; and lack of opportunities or ability to meet suitable men on their own. Most of these 13 interviewees described their arranged marriage in a matter-of-fact way, indicating that it was their parents and extended family who had identified suitable matches for them. A number of women noted that their consent had been sought before the marriage was arranged and that certain conditions were established before they accepted, so they were able to exercise a degree of agency in the negotiations. None of the interviewees said they had been married

totally against their will, although some said that they would have wished to wait longer before marriage, and in two cases (among the oldest women), it would seem that they were too young in any case to be able to offer any resistance. As one of the older women explained, with a laugh: *'There was no love marriage at the time. It was the parents who arranged the marriages'* (IGI, grandmother). This was true both for men and for women.

Breaking from established norms

There were, however, many exceptions in our study sample of individual choice of marriage partner, which took on various shadings and degrees of acceptability depending on both cultural context and individual circumstance. Individual choice of spouse was exercised by 10 of the married women we interviewed, aged from 25 to 51 years – again cutting across social categories, urban/rural contexts and educational level.

Described most often as 'love matches', some of these marriages were cases of elopement – often when it concerned inter-caste marriages, as in 4 of our case study examples. One woman resisted efforts to marry her off in her own community as *'I felt my life would be over after marriage'*, choosing instead to marry a foreigner (IDI, mountaineer). Repercussions for elopement could be harsh, including total exclusion from the natal family for variable lengths of time. Other marriages, however, were conducted with parental consent and support (sometimes readily given, other times only after much persuasion), after the couple had met and gotten to know each other – at school, at work, or (for some of the younger participants) on Facebook – telling their parents that they would like to marry only after keeping the relationship secret for some time. As a young woman in our discussion with university students explained:

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

Age at marriage and marriage payments

Age at first marriage was quite varied, but most indicators, as well as findings from our discussions, point to a gradual rise, linked both to Nepal's transition from a purely agrarian society to a more urbanised one, with more opportunities for employment outside of agriculture, and to expanded educational opportunities for women. In rural parts of the country, where these conditions do not apply, our study participants informed us that early marriage persists. A number of older women in turn pointed to even earlier traditions of marriage before puberty – at age 7 or 8 years – when the girl would move into her in-laws' house to be groomed by them for their future duties while awaiting consummation of the marriage when they were older.

In a reflection of changes over time, younger and middle-aged women in our sample were generally married in their 20s, except in some of the most recent cases of elopement, when the girl was in her teens. Students in our focus group discussions reported that the age of marriage these days is now more linked to education. As one woman said, *'Once you have an MA is a good age now for both men and women'* (focus group discussion, MA students). Another confirmed that: *'All of this used to start after the BA - now it starts after the MA'* (small group discussion, female researchers). A number of the women in our study spoke of how they were able to put off marriage until after they had finished their higher-level schooling and taken on jobs; others consented to earlier marriages only after obtaining agreement from their husbands and in-laws that they would be allowed to continue their studies and to work after marriage.

In this way, these women demonstrated increasing agency to negotiate space for their own development, either prior to or within marriage. Nevertheless, one older woman explained that, *'Parents still think of daughters as a burden and feel a lightness and relief when they are married off - daughters are the prestige of the family and if they do something bad or elope, it reflects badly on the family, so there is a sense of relief when she is married off and parents don't have to worry about her anymore'* (IGI, grandmother). And one woman, now in her 30s, reported her disappointment when at a graduation ceremony held for her by her parents, relatives failed to congratulate her on her studies, remarking instead: *'Oh, so nice, now you are ready to get married'* (IDI, CSO officer). But she held out, waiting until finishing her master's degree before getting married at age 27.

Dowry systems are the norm among some groups but not others. Our study participants reported diverse experiences of and perspectives on dowry and bride wealth. In general in Nepal, the dowry system prevails, particularly among those from Terai, while ethnic minority/indigenous groups have marriage payments going in different directions, with some arising from initial bride wealth systems that have transformed somewhat over time. It would appear from our discussions that the Hindu patterns may also be changing, with more room for individual variations; however, more focused and extensive research would be needed to draw any firm conclusions. In any case, the dowry system continues to contribute to parental worries about their daughters, in that it may be difficult for many families to raise the required amounts - particularly if they have many daughters. It can also contribute to early marriage, as the amount of dowry can rise with the age of the girl in some caste groups.

Living arrangements and the extended family

Traditionally, the living pattern after marriage is patrilocal, with women moving into their husband's place of residence. This means couples generally expect daughter(s)-in-law to join the extended household of the father-in-law as new members of the family: they also take the name and caste designation of the husband's family and contribute to the upkeep of their new household. Most of our study participants followed this pattern - for better and for worse. While others had established their own households, this was typically: in cases where the newly-wed couple lived in Kathmandu while the extended family remained in the village; in cases of marriage to a foreigner; or among some of the younger study participants. (It was explained that some younger women attempt to escape the burden of cultural expectations by seeking green card holders as prime marriage partners, partly based on the vision of increased

independence from the extended family that can be brought about by living abroad.) As one male student commented: *'Yes, once married, girls are expected to live with their in-laws, but modern girls these days look for green card holders – that way they can live away. This is because there are many rules and regulations within the extended family and they want to get free'* (FGD, MA students). A female student concurred: *'An unmarried girl living in her own household has more advantages than a young married woman living with her in-laws'* (FGD, MA students).

Some of those who lived in extended household arrangements expressed appreciation for the care and support of in-laws; others, however, described intense strain in situations where, as daughters-in-law, they were over-worked and felt under-appreciated and more or less prisoners of patriarchal structures and expectations (see Box 5). As one older woman in her 80s explained *'I had to do whatever the in-laws said – sit, go, don't go'*, while another (89 years) reported that when she entered her rural husband's home as a daughter-in-law, all of the onerous chores fell on her – collecting water, cleaning the house, grinding rice. She was, moreover, always *'scared'* in the presence of her in-laws – *'sitting on the floor, not saying much, and not eating much in their presence'*.

But, as some of the older women explained, as time went by, their children were born, and the in-laws grew older or passed away, so they transitioned from being *'just'* a daughter-in-law, with severely restricted power and autonomy, to becoming themselves the head females in the household, with power over their own daughters-in-law, thereby reproducing the discriminatory norms that they themselves had been constrained by. In this way the gendered power dynamics within the household take on a life-cycle cast.

Box 5. Varied experiences of patrilocal residence in the extended family after marriage

Some warm and supportive relationships ...

- **A woman in her 60s** of Magar birth who had eloped with a Dalit man pointed to the portrait of her recently deceased mother-in-law, which was mounted with love and pride on the wall, noting that she had lived with them until her death.
- **A woman in her late 40s** from a Chhetri family noted that her mother-in-law herself had been active in Nepali politics and so was very supportive of her in her own life and career.
- **A woman in her 40s** active in the 1996–2006 underground movement and from a Brahmin family left her young son with her mother-in-law for long stretches while she was in hiding and conditions were too dangerous for a child.
- **A woman in her 40s** counts herself as *'a very lucky lady from the beginning as both my paternal family and my husband's family encouraged me and there is mutual respect between myself, my father, husband and son – everyone equal'*. When first married into her fellow Brahmin husband's extended family – with nephews, nieces, sisters-in-law – she became the head of the home at the time, helping with the education and clothing of her nephews and nieces. But they all helped her with the cooking, cleaning, childcare and the like, *'So we were all helping each other'*.

- **A woman in her 30s** from a Newar family, trying to juggle a demanding job along with a new baby, noted that having her in-laws at home – along with a maid – helps considerably.
- **A woman in her 20s** from a Brahmin family, returning home from some time abroad in Bangalore, where her husband was working, noted that since they have come back they have lived with her in-laws and it is working out well, though, she admits with a smile, *'There are a few restrictions on my personal freedom.'*

... but many challenges and difficulties

- **A woman in her 30s** moved into her in-laws' home for two years. But though of common Chhetri background, it was not as easy as in her maternal home, where no one had ever told her when to come and go and her family had not discriminated on the basis of gender. *'So this is where I learned of the household division of labour and roles of Nepali men and women.'* She chafed at the unfair burden of labour for women – cooking, taking care of relatives – and would say to her mother-in-law, *'Is this how you judge how good a wife is, on how she prepares her pickles?'* After two years, when her husband went to study, she grew to realise that she could not conform to the expectations of her in-laws, so she moved out and now lives with her sister.
- **A woman approaching 40** married a fellow Newar from Kathmandu at a time when she had a position in a field post in a rural region. They agreed that she would move in with her husband's family after she completed her contract, but that in the interim he would visit her husband's family after she completed her contract, but that in the interim he would visit her in the field. However, while she kept up her side of the bargain, her husband did not, leading to gossip and speculation in the field about whether she was even married or not. *'So that is the dilemma of the woman – before marriage there is the problem of "Why are you not married yet", and after the marriage there is the problem of "Where is the husband?" It creates stress.'* When she then moved back to Kathmandu to live with her in-laws, *'This is when the problem started. Agreeing to live with the extended family had been a bad decision.'* Her husband was then himself working outside of Kathmandu, leaving her there all alone with his family. She wanted to live with her own mother, who was a widow, but her husband said to her, *'If you want to live with your mom, then why did you marry me?'* So she lived in his home with her two brothers-in-law and their wives and had to contribute one-third (her own money – not her husband's) for all of the household expenses, and also had to cook for 13 people – getting up at 4.30am to do all the work before going out to the office. Her sisters-in-law did nothing around the house. Living like this for five years, she fell into a depression and consulted a counsellor at work who helped, but prescribed medicine that made her gain weight. She could not talk with her mother, as that would only worry her, and she did not get any support from her husband, who took his own family's side. So her colleagues at work became her real family and support system.
- **A woman in her 40s**, born and married into a Brahmin family, faced systematic and structural discrimination and abuse from her mother-in-law and her father-in-law's sister, who also lived with them, such that *'there were these two bitter old women there'* who seemed to make a point of denigrating her as the younger son's wife. Her mother-in-law would criticise her feet for being too wide, as there is a saying that a girl can be judged by the size of her feet, and when they shared a two-floor house, the mother-in-law would listen to her footsteps upstairs saying, *'She is not good – we can hear her walking. A girl should not be heard in the house.'* She also criticised her religious rituals – noting that she had forgotten the mantra that is supposed to be memorised and uttered at all times, saying *'Oh the food that is prepared by the daughter-in-law who does not say the mantra is like food touched by a dog.'* In the village

where the in-laws lived, the mother-in-law told everyone that she was a demon. And when allocating household tasks, the mother-in-law would always favour the elder daughter-in-law: *'When she gave potatoes to peel, for example, she would give the big ones to the elder sister-in-law and the small wrinkly ones to me!'*

- **Another woman in her 40s** married a fellow Newar and moved in with her in-laws while doing various jobs. But when she had her two children she had to give these up as her husband was out all day at work and she had to do all of the housework. Her mother-in-law helped a little, but her sister-in-law just sat in bed watching TV. *'I was always answering to others – with no rest at all.'* Although from a more educated family than her in-laws, she found that she could not stand up to them: *'My shyness did not allow me to fight for my rights, and that was my downfall.'* After eight years of marriage, when her brother-in-law was about to bring his own bride into the family, her in-laws warned her in advance about not trying to domineer the new woman – who was from a poorer family. They had also *'tortured'* her for having a girl as a first child and were always insisting that she should bring more money into the household. Tensions finally reached breaking point and she, her husband and daughter moved out for a time – living in rented accommodation. After their son was born, her in-laws took them back, but while things were better for a time, the abuse started again – this time by her sister-in-law. So they built their own house on the outskirts of town and moved out definitively.
- **A recently married woman in her 20s** noted that it was not until she moved in with her in-laws at marriage to a fellow Newar that she became fully aware of gender discrimination, and the specific expectations of her as a woman and a daughter-in-law. As she explains: *'I had always felt like a son in my house and never felt that I had to live the life of a daughter (girl) either in the way I talked or what I wore or other activities. But at my in-laws' place, I realised the real difference between men and women – and a daughter-in-law in particular. I found myself in a completely different environment and I am really suppressed. All I can say is that my in-laws never wanted a wife for their son, but instead they wanted a daughter-in-law for themselves. That is what I have realised.'* Part of the problem was that her in-laws dismissed the household help when she moved in, as they expected her to take on all of the chores, though she is also holding down a job and so does not have much spare time. When she speaks out against such things, her in-laws – particularly the mother-in-law – express their dissatisfaction, saying that *"We have brought in an educated daughter-in-law, so of course she will raise her voice"*. Her mother-in-law refuses to acknowledge the verbal abuse she administers as *'violence'*, saying that she herself had been physically beaten by her own mother-in-law, so what is her daughter-in-law complaining about? As the young woman explained, *'People do not realise that they should not let the young generation face the same abuse that they faced; rather they want to take revenge for what they went through. For me, though I am facing violence through my mother-in-law, I will definitely not impose that to my future daughter-in-law.'* She feels that the advanced age of her in-laws contributes to the problem – they were both over 60 and so *'there is a huge generation gap and they have the old mindset. It is just the clothes that are modern.'* She does not blame her husband for the situation at his home *'as he is used to listening to his mother ever since he was a child'* and now feels that he himself is beginning to be more aware of the unfairness of it all and is a great support to her, helping her with the chores, for example. As she concluded, *'I try my best to retain self-control, but at times I burst out crying ... Life is going on somehow.'*

Within the tensions generated by such extended household situations, relations between husband and wife could also become strained. In other cases, wives felt strongly supported by their husbands to deal with such problems from in-laws and the relationship was not affected. Divorce is considered to be the last resort and is usually avoided. It is more common for a couple to separate permanently while remaining legally married. There was only one example of divorce in our small sample of study participants: there were, however, a couple of cases of de facto separation.

Reproductive expectations, children and son preference

Childbearing is expected of all married couples and until recently men were legally allowed to take another wife if the first wife did not bear children. While the law has changed as part of overall efforts to establish a more gender-equitable legal framework, the desire to bear at least one son remains strong. This is linked to patterns of patrilineal transmission of the family name and property (which continues, despite recent changes in inheritance laws) as well as (among Hindus) the ritual significance of sons in performing funeral rites for the parents. As one young woman explained, *'In Hindu culture, only a son can open the door of heaven for the mother and father'* (FGD, MA students). But family sizes overall are decreasing as the economy changes, women enter the professional world, and family planning practices become more widespread. Such factors are significant drivers of change. As one young woman explained: *'The in-laws now approve of and promote the daughter-in-law's work so they accept her putting off having children'* (small group discussion with female researchers). Conditions of childbirth for women have also improved significantly, with growing urbanisation and availability of health services. Our study participants discussed different aspects of childbearing and expectations as well as changes in the childbirth experience itself (Box 6).

Box 6. Experiences and expectations of childbearing

Persistence of subtle or overt pressure to bear sons

- **A woman in her late 30s** has been married for 12 years but has only one daughter, aged 11. Her Gurung family and entourage – and particularly her mother-in-law – are urging her to continue to try for a son and she is hoping that this might be more likely now that her husband has come back from his work abroad as a male caregiver. *'My husband is now back from Israel, so everyone is waiting!'* She notes that they are indeed trying, but nothing so far. Her mother-in-law is encouraging her that it is possible even at her relatively advanced age, and they have consulted the astrological charts for the most auspicious dates for the birth of a boy. Her mother-in-law says, *'It is destiny – a child will come or not, but still try'*.
- **A woman in her 40s** from a Brahmin family reported how her sister-in-law was favoured in part because her two first-born children were sons, while her own first-born was a daughter. On her second pregnancy her mother-in-law divined from the astrological charts that this child would be a son but that she would die in childbirth and was happily making plans to identify a new wife for her son: *'She was so happy that she had started planning to find a second wife for her son and was so angry when I didn't in fact die giving birth to my son!'*

- **A woman in her 40s** from a Newar family had such difficulty living with her in-laws that she and her husband and daughter moved out on their own. Among other problems she experienced, *'They tortured me for having only a girl as my first child'*. The family was invited to move back in, however, after the birth of her second child – a son.
- **An elderly woman, aged 89**, who had six sons recalls that, one after another as her six sons were born, her husband – who was a soldier in India (as were many from their Gurung community) – would give a big party for his fellow soldiers there, as this was prestigious. *'It would not have been the same for a daughter... They didn't give much importance to daughters, and my husband would not have distributed sweets in India if I had had a daughter.'*

Significant changes in childbearing conditions

- **A grandmother aged 80** explained: 'I gave birth to all of my children at home. There were no specialists in our Gurung community – just anyone at home could help. I do not know anything about herbal medicine. Childbirth was not as difficult back then as it is now – not a lot of labour pains or difficulties like now. Women were stronger back then and had to get up right after birth to clean themselves, the baby, fetching water, etc. My own daughter also gave birth at home here in Kathmandu. Nowadays, though, most women give birth in hospital. But I think it is better at home as you do not have to travel. It is warmer and is not all cement like the hospital.'
- **Another grandmother in her mid-80s** reported: 'At age 16 (1951) I had my first son, then another son in 1953, and my daughter in 1955. There was no hospital to give birth [she laughs when we ask her this.] All of my children were born at home with no problem, though the last one, my girl, was a little hard. It is always harder to give birth to a daughter than to sons. Even among my friends I have seen this. There was a male neighbour – a fellow Brahmin – who put tika [red powder or paste] on my forehead – I am not sure exactly how that works, but it made the labour go more smoothly.'
- **A grandmother approaching 90** recalled: 'When I had my sons, I had them alone. There were no hospitals or doctors in our Gurung community – sometimes the neighbour could come to help. But often the woman just gave birth while working out in the fields – she would cut the umbilical cord with her scythe, wash the baby off with grass, and come home carrying both baby and the grass she had cut for fodder. All of my sons were born like that. Nowadays, in Kathmandu, the woman visits the doctor as soon as she is one month pregnant – but back there if they die.'

IDs and IGLs with women of various backgrounds and ages

The special vulnerability of widows

The particularly vulnerable situation of widows in patriarchal societies has been widely reported, and in Hindu society in particular, with its tradition of 'sati' (self-immolation by the wife on the funeral pyre of her deceased husband), the plight of widows has garnered much international attention. While laws safeguarding the rights of widows in Nepal have recently come into force (see Box 11 for further details), widowhood remains a perilous time for many

women, who are often left dependent on their remaining male kin – including in-laws and sons – for support. Widows are also commonly subjected to certain social and cultural restrictions, particularly among some social groups. While it is common for men who have lost their wives to remarry, it is against social norms for women who have lost their husbands to do so. Four of our study participants recounted their experiences as widows, with two (a mother and her daughter) suffering from difficulties in obtaining their share of the marital property (see Box 7).

Box 7. Intergenerational challenges facing widows

Mother

- **The mother, aged 86**, was born in India to a Brahmin family and married at around age 15 into a related family in Kathmandu after her husband lost his first wife and needed a new one to care for his son and take on household duties. She bore two sons and one daughter, but at age 22, shortly after the birth of her last child, her husband died suddenly. In their new circumstances, the family had to let go of their farm labourers and work the land themselves, but her in-laws continued to care for her and she was able to maintain the children in government schools on scholarships set aside for orphans.

Issues subsequently arose with her in-laws around property. The big house was registered in her husband's name as the eldest son. On his death, therefore, by rights it passed onto her, as his wife. However, after the land and house were registered in her name, she went to visit her maternal home in India. Rumours started that she had run away/eloped and her brothers-in-law filed a case to register the property registered in their name.

She returned quickly and went *'from office to office, counter to counter'* to try to settle the issue, talking with different people each time. But, as she learned, *'It was a whole system'*. And at one point when she had been waiting outside and then came back in, the man at the desk said, *'What are you doing in here? Your brother-in-law came in already and it is all sorted.'* She did not know what was happening – she thought everything was in order; as she had not done anything wrong, she believed in justice. But overall, it took 10 years to settle the matter, and in the end the land was divided and she got her fair share. In the meantime, there was a lot of tension in the household, which reflected on the children, and they were not able to fully exploit their lands.

The lesson she learned and tried to instil in her children – and especially her daughter – was that you need to study, work hard, and earn a living so that you could stand on your own two feet. She herself had never worked outside of the house and feels that is partly why her brother-in-law and sister-in-law, who were more educated than she was, were able to dominate on many issues.

Daughter

- **Her daughter, now 62 years**, grew up as the youngest of the three siblings, without ever having known her father. She studied up to degree level and then started working. She was married at age 30 – a relatively late age, which she attributes to her status as an 'orphan' and discrimination against girls whose families cannot raise sufficient dowry. But her husband was ailing, and she was widowed shortly thereafter when her daughter was 2 years old and her son was just 15 months old. She was working at a bank at the time, and although she faced limitless problems, *'Because I had a job at the bank, I had cash in hand and was eventually able to overcome these'*.

Her in-laws treated her very badly within the extended family – *'like a house servant'* – even when her husband was ailing and she was trying to care for him. After his death, her mother-in-law imposed all of the restrictions on widows, such as the colour code for dressing (wearing white only) and fasting. She was also expected to refrain from visiting her own mother for one year, which was especially difficult because at the time her children were living with her mother, as she had not been able to cope with both them and her ailing husband. When she could not bear it any longer, she broke the rule and went to visit her mother and children. Thereafter the behaviour in her in-laws' house became very tense and she was treated like *'an enemy'*. She was overburdened with work – both inside the household and in her paid job at the bank – and suffered greatly. Towards the end, she and her children, by then age 23 and 24, were sharing just one room, with no room for studying or anything else. And she asked herself, *'All of this struggle and work, for what?'*

She had been struggling throughout to obtain the share of her husband's property that was due to her. But, in her case, the land was still registered in the name of the father-in-law, after which it would pass to the mother-in-law and brother-in-law. Whenever she tried to raise the issue, her in-laws would put her off and give her the run-around. Upon her father-in-law's death, her mother-in-law assured her that the brother-in-law would take care of it. But he never did. At one point, they called her before the lands registration board and attempted to bully her into accepting an illegal partition of land in which her plot would have no right of entry, but she refused. She had by then become active in the Women's Human Rights group working to raise awareness of and support for widows' rights, so drew strength from her colleagues there; new laws had also recently come into force to safeguard widows' property, but these were still not being fully implemented.

Some five years back, her case was finally settled, and on her retirement from the bank after 30 years of work, she was able to put enough money together to build her own place where she now lives with her daughter and son, with moral support from her mother and brother. She points out that even with the support she received, her economic self-sufficiency, and a lawyer engaged through the Women's Human Rights group, this struggle had been very difficult for her. How much more so would it be for others who do not have such advantages? Moreover, she has been able to share all of these issues and problems with others, but in earlier times, it was a question of family name and prestige. One could not raise such things without fear of community censorship – gossip by neighbours that would tarnish the family name.

That underscored for her the importance of economic empowerment for women: *'You have to have resources on hand – then you can speak'*. It also underscores the work of organisations involved in women's human rights that offer not just legal advice but solidarity and moral support – working as a pressure group to strengthen the position of the individual. She could never have stood up to or spoken out against her mother-in-law the way she had if it were not for her job, which gave her security and meant she was not dependent on her in-laws. Nor could she have stood up for herself and her children without the awareness and support she received from women's rights advocates and activists. This, therefore, is an example of hard-won progress.

IGI, mother and daughter, both widows

The experiences of the other two widows in our sample were equally painful, but showed that under certain circumstances, the prevailing norms of exclusion and exploitation can be overcome (see Box 8).

Box 8. Bending norms around the exclusion and social isolation of widows

- **An upper-class Brahmin woman in her 70s** was widowed and left childless shortly after she married when a teenager. Her story shows how in spite of prevailing norms and attitudes, she was able to rise to a position of power and distinction within government, working at district level. She herself suggests that while being single in her various district postings was not without its perils, not having a family to support was actually advantageous, as she was not compelled into a constant search for additional income. She was so busy in her life that she never thought about remarriage, though some people were urging her to, as they were trying to challenge gender norms that restrict remarriage for women (but not men). Currently retired from government service, she reflected, *'If you stay single, they will talk, and if you remarry, they will talk ... They need to talk, so ...'*
- **A hill Brahmin woman in her 40s** recounted that her husband was killed in the Maoist struggle, leaving her on her own with a young son as she continued with her underground activities as chair of the women's district committee. Her story shows how social norms can be overcome in part through a deliberate process of social and cultural transformation. She recounts in harrowing detail the night her husband was killed during the government's 2001 'Operation Kilo Sienna' against the Maoists. So it was, that *'I was married at 18, two years later at age 20 my daughter was born, and two years after that at age 22 my husband was killed and I became a widow'*. She could not mourn her husband in the usual way of wearing white and performing 13 days of sacrifices, as she was in hiding and on the run from the police. As more militants were widowed in the violence, the party decided to start a movement encouraging remarriage of widows, and as a leader within the party, there was a lot of pressure on her to do so herself. So in 2004, before the Peace Accord, she remarried a fellow activist who had also lost his wife in the uprising and had one son, reporting that *'When we married, we exchanged weapons instead of gifts'*. She had been worried about the reaction of her in-laws to this news, and indeed the villagers had started talking against them when they remarried, as this was considered anathema. But her mother-in-law defended her and she continues to visit her first set of in-laws, since, as she explains, *'We have adopted the whole nation as our family'*. She and her current husband also continue to honour the memory of their deceased spouses.

IDs with women of different ages and backgrounds

Generational changes and continuities in gender norms and experiences

Intergenerational experiences of growing up shed light on changes over time linked both to changing norms but also to changing circumstances. These include, for example, family

migration into urban areas, which opens up new opportunities in terms of education and employment. Examples from our study suggest that while certain changes may reflect generational shifts, such changes are not always linear but can take twists and turns depending on circumstances, character, opportunities available, widowhood and other factors. While our study sample is too small to provide precise information on overall trends, it does provide illustrative comparisons of experiences across the life cycle. The examples in Table 2 highlight both changes and continuities: a marked trend towards higher education and educational expectations for girls; some indications of enhanced agency for women and work outside of the household; but also continued expectations (for some) around arranged marriages and living with in-laws as daughter-in-law in the extended family.

Table 2. Illustrative findings on generational changes from selective participants

	Older generation	Middle generation	Younger generation
Gurung family from the eastern hills moving to Kathmandu in the second generation	Grandmother, 89, from a farming family in a village with no school, growing up doing housework and farm work. <i>'I didn't even know how to speak – just making carpets, brewing alcohol for sale, grinding paddy and selling rice'</i> . Married at 20 in an arranged marriage into a nearby village where she lived with her in-laws and had 6 sons.	Daughter-in-law, 38, from a nearby eastern village where she studied up through grade 10 before completing intermediary level in Kathmandu. A <i>'tomboy'</i> who got into fights with boys, her mother warned her that <i>'Nobody will ever come and ask for your hand in marriage – you are too proud and stubborn. You should change.'</i> Arranged marriage at 26; living with her mother-in-law and now working in the police. Only 1 daughter – trying for more children.	Daughter, 12, born in Kathmandu and currently in 6 th grade. Wants to join the police like her mom when she grows up.
Gurung family from the eastern hills moving to Kathmandu in the second generation	Grandmother, 80, from a village farming family; her father was in the Indian army. No health post or school in the village so no education. Married at 14 in an arranged marriage to a villager also in the Indian army and lived with in-laws. Had four children (3 sons/1 daughter). Widowed and moved to Kathmandu when her youngest daughter was 8 or 9, living in brother-in-law's house.	Daughter, 49, started primary school in the village, then continued to grade 9 in Kathmandu, but dropped out when she got pregnant and eloped with her husband, in the army. Now has 2 sons in their 20s and living with her mother.	Daughter-in-law, 25, grew up as an orphan not knowing she had parents, who had both migrated for work. 1 st in class in the orphanage school; wanted to study abroad for her BA but resources limited, so went into business studies in Kathmandu and is currently working on her MBA. Arranged marriage at 22 while a student, moving in with mother-in-law. No children yet.

<p>Mixed Brahmin/ Newar family from Kathmandu</p>	<p>Grandmother, 73, from a respected Brahmin family whose father married her mother when she was 11, after his first wife died and left him with 2 older children. Out of 4 daughters, she was the only one to study and had to really struggle economically – even at a government school, <i>'But I wanted to be intelligent – to come out of that circle.'</i> Eloped with a Newar man at age 26 but continued for her intermediate degree (age 28) and a university diploma in food and nutrition (at age 48) after going back to school. Worked in university administration for 32 years.</p>	<p>Daughter, 46, the eldest of 3 siblings raised as a Buddhist and Newar – like her father. Felt that her brother was favoured by her parents (being more pushed to succeed, provided with school materials and the like). Attended mixed primary school and girls' secondary school as her father did not want her mingling with boys at that age. Studied through intermediate level. Has always had <i>'lots of energy inside'</i>, but with limited support from her family to help her <i>'come out of myself'</i>. Love marriage in her 20s; 2 children (1 daughter/1 son); has worked in education.</p>	<p>Granddaughter, 24, a 'tomboy' growing up with mostly boys as friends, as <i>'I did not like all of the dramas that girls engaged in'</i>. Did not start wearing make-up until after her marriage, and was very outspoken in the classroom – <i>'always raising my voice for one thing or the other'</i>, which led to comments on how unusual this was for a girl. Studied business administration at intermediate level and took a gap year before going on to study for a BA in tourism – as given a lot of liberty by her parents. Now married for one year in love match – no children yet. Suffering from a feeling of oppression within her in-laws' family.</p>
<p>Brahmin family from Kathmandu</p>	<p>Grandmother, 86, originally from a farming family in India – one of 8 siblings. Studied through grade 3 at village school but stopped at first menstruation. Arranged marriage at 15 into family in Kathmandu who needed help managing household. Took on cooking for the extended household and had 3 children (2 sons/1 daughter). Continued education up to 10th grade. Widowed at age 22 and continued living with in-laws; struggled for 10 years to register land in her name and her son's.</p>	<p>Her daughter, 62, incited by her mother to work hard at home, complete her BA and find a job for economic independence. Arranged marriage at 30 considered late and a <i>'reflection of discrimination'</i> (since she was an orphan and her mother could not afford dowry). Widowed when her 2 children (1 son /1daughter) were young; struggled with overwork and tensions in her in-laws' home and finally won her fair share of her husband's estate – building a home for herself and her children with the money she earned working 30 years at a bank.</p>	<p>Granddaughter, 27, still single, pursuing studies abroad.</p>

Narratives of professional engagement and collective agency

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

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

Their experiences are grouped below, focusing on the different gender norms our participants encountered during their various professional activities and on how they were able to overcome these to either act as role models or work for the advancement of others.

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

A number of our study participants were active in the political movements of the 1990s and have since assumed leadership in various parties. Others serve as minority ward representatives. All encountered both opportunities and constraints as they exercised their functions as women (see Box 9). Their stories demonstrate the importance of political mobilisation and organisation around ideals of equity and social justice in which progress for women is couched. They also demonstrate the ongoing challenges women encounter as they struggle against social norms that restrict women's voice in the public domain.

Box 9. Gendered experiences of political mobilisation around women's issues

Maoist party mobilisation and activism

- **One participant in her 40s** moved from mobilisation activities within the Maoist students' movement to the Maoist mobilisation of women, to raise consciousness of the importance of solidarity, of education

for girls, and of organising against social injustice. At the time, only men could go out and gather in public in groups – sitting under the trees and discussing. So bringing women together was, at first, difficult. People would evoke a Nepali proverb about how silly it was to see ‘hens crowing’ if a woman dared to speak in public. As this woman tried to mobilise other women, people in the village would point an accusing finger at her and say, ‘*Look, this daughter-in-law is stirring up our daughters-in-law and taking them out of the house*’. Some women were too scared to join in public, as their husbands would not allow them to go out, though they would offer support in private. So she also had to try to convince the husbands and even the fathers-in-law about the importance of women’s mobilisation. And she found that her position as school teacher in the village afforded her a certain status. Women’s mobilisation activities were couched within the wider struggle against inequality, including caste-based inequalities, affirming that ‘*People have died for this – including women ... We would not be where we are now without this movement*.’ Moving into the Central Committee in Kathmandu after the 1996 Peace Accord, she was elected to the Constituent Assembly to help draft the new Constitution and ensure that it was favourable to women.

She observes that after the Peace Accord, women experienced something like a setback. ‘All of the women in the movement were young and now they have gone back to their household roles – busy with families and children’. From her point of view, an environment has not been established in party politics in which women can participate equally. Now, when it is about elections and state power, women have been side-lined: ‘We have no muscle, no money [no relations with big contributors] so it is difficult to compete in elections’. Women are calling for one out of three representatives in each constituency to be reserved for female candidates, but the Party is resisting. For her, the Maoist movement had a big role in pushing the agenda forward. Now they need to keep that agenda moving, since implementation of so many things is needed. ‘So we always have to keep fighting in spite of all of the practical problems that women face.’

Marxist-Leninist party activism

- **One participant, in her 50s**, is a former Parliamentarian and political leader who describes her motivation for political engagement in her early observation of social inequalities and discrimination growing up as a Brahmin, particularly based around caste. ‘*For example, a Dalit tailor came to our house to stitch our clothes and wouldn’t be allowed in.*’ She was also influenced by her elder brothers who would bring back textbooks on Marx and Mao and other revolutionary leaders that she would read, coming to the conclusion that Communism was the clearest answer to class, caste and gender discrimination and the way to bring about social justice. Her main task at district level was to go to different areas, talk to women and members of oppressed groups such as Dalits, to raise awareness of their rights. As she focused on women, she noted that: ‘*At the time the women were not aware of these rights and could not speak. They were scared and had no place to present their problems and no people who would listen to them. They would just be sent back. Many women had problems, so we would start discussions and everyone would participate and start crying. All women were repressed, from the palace to the poor. Among the rich they may have enough food but suffered gender-based violence and other sorts of discrimination; Dalit women were also excluded. It was only the nature or degree of oppression that differed.*’

It was an exciting period when she worked as district representative in parliamentary discussions around the rights of women: at one point she put out her foot to prevent male Parliamentarians from

leaving the chambers, saying *'You are not leaving until these measures pass!'* From her perspective, women's rights are now enshrined in the Constitution, but challenges remain in their implementation. Such challenges – for example, on effective implementation of political quotas for women – are linked to male *'mindsets'* that continue to cast doubts on women's capacities. Men say, *'Oh, what can a woman do?'* and do not take them seriously in politics. She faces this problem daily with her male colleagues. *'In spite of all of the revolutions, movements, transitions and the Constitution, the concept of "woman" has somehow not changed.'* The patriarchal mindset is not only embedded in men, but in women as well, and the struggles will continue, as *'change is difficult to achieve.'*

- **Another participant in her 30s**, active in party politics since her student days, is currently a Member of Parliament and member of the Central Committee, having moved up from positions at village level. Engaging in the political process with a view to advancing gender equality has been challenging. As part of the Constituent Assembly there was great consciousness around the importance of developing a woman-friendly Constitution and party. But as a woman in the political leadership, she faced discrimination at two levels: first, through the image, ideals and expectations that society has of women: While her own family did not object to her breaking norms, others in society did not approve of her breaking the rules on what a good daughter should be, so she had to fight against this in her mobilisation activities. Second, she faced discrimination through the political structure itself: *'Political parties are the product of that same society, so what is inherent in society is there too,'* she explained.

She has had to fight to help ensure women's place in the party structure as well as to promote women's leadership positions in politics, pointing to a significant gap between the ideology of gender equality (which is part of the Marxist-Leninist political party platform) and its implementation in practice, which requires further work and struggle. Echoing the views cited above, she explained: *'There is a general feeling that things are easier for women during times of peace. But actually, for example, women were more represented among the Maoists – 40% – and everything was tolerated. But now after the peace process, they have barely 15%. So it seems that the forest is a good place for women, but not society. When women are linked back into society it becomes more difficult for them.'* Within the parties, she explains, the balance of leadership has not yet been achieved: *'Party officials say "We will have this during the next General Assembly". But we are still waiting – it is a long journey. So on the one hand, we have all of these advances for women – the picture is not totally negative',* she explained. *'We have to have patience, but we also need a strategy. So now we have an inter-party women's group to ensure that women's issues are taken on in the political platforms.'*

Inter Party Women's Alliance (IPWA)

- **A participant in her 50s** in a leadership role within the Inter Party Women's Alliance (IPWA) explained that she had seen much discrimination against women in her home district in the Terai, including issues around dowry, female seclusion, citizenship, early marriage, and school dropout, which she also saw first-hand as a teacher. She herself married at age 17 and entered politics soon thereafter – the only woman in her district to do so. As the Madhesi representative to the Constituent Assembly, she worked to ensure that the Constitution was representative of women and promoted their interests. Now, in her current work with the IPWA, she is helping to expand its network and mobilise members of the different parties around key issues of concern for women. *'We come together around common issues concerning women and women's rights and to ensure that women's issues are fully taken into*

consideration in all bills and laws.’ From her perspective, key issues include: ensuring equitable citizenship laws; monitoring mandatory proportional representation of women in Parliament and ministries; ending violence against women; and addressing gender discrimination around property issues. She admits that progress has been uneven. In political representation, for example, *‘It is just talk – and we are still struggling with this. Men are resisting this because, of course, if women come in, men will go out.’* In general, around issues of concern for women, *‘We have been able to expand awareness but are still working on implementation. And one day it will be possible.’* The IPWA is currently developing an updated common platform for women, resolving that *‘What is not working for women should change’.*

Minority ward representatives

- **A Dalit women’s ward representative, in her mid-30s**, is Newar by birth but assumed Dalit identity when she married her husband (a Dalit). She has been active in the Feminist Dalit Organisation (FEDO) since 2006, serving as its chair for the past 6 years. FEDO was established in 1994 by a group of Dalit women to *‘fight against caste and gender discrimination and to construct a just and equitable society’*. In 2011 she entered politics, joining the UML, participating in the regional elections in 2015 for Parliament and the local government elections of 2016/17. She observes that Dalit women suffer double oppression. First, as Dalits, suffering from social discrimination and exclusion and living in poverty. And second, as women, who face gender as well as caste discrimination and – compared to Dalit men – are generally less educated, with less access to income, and with limited voice. In her mobilisation efforts she is often criticised by other Nepali women who say *‘Oh, you are always talking about Dalits – what about wider women’s issues?’* She also faces resistance from men in the Dalit community who accuse her of turning their wives into rebels. This happened within her own circle when she tried to help her sister-in-law obtain justice when experiencing domestic violence and her sister-in-law’s husband complained to her own husband, saying: *‘Don’t let her come and interfere in this matter – your wife is teaching bad things and tarnishing our name, making our wives rebel’*. So men in the community are pressuring her husband to prevent her from stirring their wives to action (in this case, urging simple mediation rather than taking the issue through the courts). This means that even though the instruments for helping women to access justice are there, she cannot always help women access these because of social pressure/sanctions.
- **An indigenous women’s ward representative, approaching 40**, is of the Magar ethnic group and grew up in a remote village in the mid-western hills where she was active in community development groups. She trained as a nurse and worked for a time at a district hospital, but quit after experiencing sexual harassment during night shifts by members of the local elite who *‘misbehave with nurses’* with impunity, as hospital managers refuse to act against them. She entered politics through her NGO work, with her entourage encouraging her to stand for election as ward representative. She feels that it is because of ‘culture’ that women are oppressed, and this is what makes it so challenging to effect changes through politics: *‘Even when we have women representatives, we always have to fight for things – men might not say no to us outright, but they will go around and around and in the end their voice prevails. Also within the party [when we raise these issues] we are made to feel that we are going against the family.’* She noted that in spite of quotas, there is a long way to go before women achieve effective political representation; at municipal level, for example, all of the mayoral posts go to men while women become deputy mayors. *‘So people say women are now represented in government, but we aren’t really.’* Nevertheless, she says, *‘I am still fighting!’* For her, the key issue for women is economic empowerment,

first and foremost: *'This comes first. Unless you have that, nothing will work. Women need money for everything'*. She noted other key issues too: continued education, particularly among minority groups; and protection against gender-based violence, which is widespread among all groups but not always evident because of the public stigma attached to it which, coupled with women's economic dependence on men, prevents them reporting it.

IDs, and small group discussion (SGD) with women of different ages and backgrounds

Working through government structures for women's empowerment

Several participants seized upon new opportunities for women in government and service provision, working in various capacities to help bring about social development and safeguard social security in Nepal. Their stories reflect both the ground-breaking nature of their roles as women as well as the particular gender-based constraints women face in public life and communities (see Box 10).

Box 10. Engaging in government service at various levels

District level

- **A woman in her late 70s** has had a distinguished career in government office at district level. Her first post was with the Ministry of Home Affairs during the Panchayat system, when she began working on women and development issues – responsible for programmes in 16 districts in the eastern part of the country: *'The aim was to bring up women from the remote rural areas through functional literacy, hygiene, education'*. Later, after returning from a prestigious scholarship study abroad, she applied for government service at district level, where she was appointed as the first woman in charge of coordinating security in the district. It happened so quickly that it was publicised all around before she could even inform family and friends: *'My parents heard about it on the radio and my father was not happy as he said, "Oh, now you will have to work with the police and politicians – all of whom are men"'*. This was at the time of the first multi-party election in 1989/90 and was an exciting period. She had many things to learn in her new job. *'For example, I didn't know what to do when the police saluted me – how to respond, as a woman?'* She drew on help from her junior officers and while it was difficult at first, she learned what to do and liked the fact that every day was a challenge.

Others would tease her that she liked the power and the prestige of the position, as those in her function *'are like kings in the districts!'* At meetings where all district heads were called together, she would be the only woman and it took some time for the others to know what to think of her: *'But the others had to accept me – they tried of course to dominate me, but they could not'* – because she, like they, had been appointed directly by the Minister. Moreover, she was very *'direct'* and could speak frankly with ministers as well as the Prime Minister when different issues arose. She worked for a total

of 11 years in different districts, with her last posting in Kathmandu. Everywhere she was posted she worked with local women – though this was not strictly within her mandate. On citizenship cases, for example, she would go to court for them, which was regarded as highly unusual, considering that she was the judge's superior! So this was against protocol, but she would persuade the court to settle things, explaining that she was working on a personal level, not in her official function

She found both advantages and disadvantages as a woman in these highly visible positions. The fact that she was single (she had been widowed very early and had no children) and did not have a family to support worked in her favour – unlike her male colleagues who were always struggling to find ways to augment their salaries and found it difficult to be transferred around to different districts. However, she had to be extremely careful of her behaviour and public decorum, as even a hint of impropriety about interactions with men would start rumours flying and destroy her reputation and credibility. *'In your district functions, you are surrounded by men – a driver, guard, boy – all men, so you have to be careful. A woman has to guard her reputation.'* And her mobility was restricted; she didn't go anywhere, in fact, except to official functions. And unlike many of her male counterparts, she could not go out drinking with men – for this was forbidden as both a high-caste Hindu and a woman. She could not even be seen buying alcohol for official gatherings that she organised, and this, she reports, is still the case today. *'Colleagues will, for example, offer you a drink as a test and if you accept, as a woman, you are not respected. They will say you are cheap.'*

Departmental level

- **A woman in her 50s** holds a leadership position in a government ministry. The aims of her department are, among other things, to empower women, especially those who are economically poor, socially discriminated against or otherwise disadvantaged; and to mainstream gender concerns in decentralised planning and review. She has been involved in programmes supporting women's social mobilisation and empowerment, through an integrated approach that combines awareness-raising, leadership training, and economic and social development: *'The aim is not just to promote economic activities and empowerment but to effect social transformation. You cannot start from economic empowerment only; you have to do everything at the same time – education, protection, leadership skills-training. So it is important to take an integrated approach. Through community meetings you give space to get together, share feelings and ideas. You provide an environment to bring these out from the home and inner perspective.'* Much effort has gone into the organisation of women's groups (at village level), committees (at hamlet level) and cooperatives (at ward level) that serve multiple purposes – as discussion groups, savings and loans groups, and neighbourhood watch groups around gender-based violence. They also work to empower adolescent girls through a programme called Kishori, which provides life skills and training.

Their work over the years has not been without challenges. The Maoist movement, for example, affected much of the countryside where they worked. There would be lengthy debates about what was needed for social transformation, with the Maoists maintaining that this could only come about through force, and the department insisting that change must come through persuasion as it has to 'come from the heart – internally'. *'For the department, the accent is on working with local values for until and unless people become internally convinced of something, they will not change.'* This clearly demonstrates the perceived importance of changing social norms in order to promote gender equality and women's empowerment.

The interviewee noted significant regional differences in programme effectiveness, based on a combination of geographical, cultural and political factors. Some of the most positive impacts are seen in the central hill regions, though the 2015 earthquake caused many setbacks. In the high mountain zones, accessibility has been an issue, while in the plains there is generally more gender discrimination among the local population, along with other political problems affecting the region. In Kathmandu and other cities, the situation is very different from that in rural areas, and women experience more progress. She explains that this is because, in general, *'Social transformation works better in and is facilitated by mixed societies'*.

Under Nepal's current policy of devolution, responsibility for the women's development programme and activities of the district women and children's offices has now been transferred to the municipalities. The department is concerned about sustainability and is providing capacity-building support to ensure that activities can continue and that the three-tiered structure of the organisation of women's groupings can continue to be supported.

Police force

- **One woman, in her late 30s**, from a Gurung village in the hills, was one of the 12,000 women who were recruited in the government's armed police force out of a pool of 45,000 who applied when applications were first opened to women (after the Maoist movement opened the way with women combatants). The Nepali Police now have a progressive gender policy (2012), which aims for a steady increase in female police staff from current levels of 6%, in line with the national gender equality and proportional representation policy, and in view of *'the imperative to ensure a gender-sensitive and women-friendly work environment within the police institution'*. The policy recognises the importance of appropriate responses to gender-based crimes and discrimination and is committed to *'prioritizing gender based cases and issues both within and outside the organization'* (Nepal Police, 2069).

The woman comes from an army family; most of her uncles had also been in the service, but she was the first woman and had wanted to be in the army or police since childhood. She enjoys her work, which includes keeping records of weapons, participating in regular training, and conducting patrols during times of heightened security – for example, during elections. She has participated in the UN peacekeeping mission in Liberia where she dealt – among other things – with issues around contacts between members of the international police force and local Liberian girls and women. She explained that women and men have slightly different assignments in the police force in Nepal. For example, the men are usually assigned to dangerous guard duty around gold or diamond mines when they are on overseas missions, and also provide security around the court and senior leaders. Women are geared to activities concerning women – for example, thefts involving women or body-searching of women suspects, as men cannot touch women. While women and men get the same pay for the same work, neither are well paid. She had three months' maternity leave after giving birth to her daughter, and then continued working. She is now eligible for her pension, but does not want to stop working, considering all that she has put into it. Her daughter (age 12) admires her uniform and weapons and also aspires to an army career. The British government is planning to recruit Nepali women for the army from 2020, and her daughter will be eligible by that time. That is what both mother and daughter wish.

Government health services

- **A retired midwife in her 60s** was among the seventh cohort of midwifery trainees and 16 out of 21 who passed the course. Most of her career was at a health post in eastern Terai, where women faced many reproductive health challenges, including: lack of family planning services (partly out of a desire for many children and particularly sons); weak referral systems for difficult labour and delivery; malnutrition among women (partly due to traditional food taboos combined with overwork in the rural economy); and overall poverty. Security during the Maoist uprisings was also a problem. Health conditions for women and children have been improving in Terai, though certain ethnic or socio-cultural groups have been left behind and continue to live in poverty. She has received many certificates of appreciation for her work and enjoys a high level of trust from people who respect the work of midwives.
- **Two health workers, in their 30s and 40s**, cover two urban wards outside of Kathmandu at a health centre with a catchment population of 24,000 of mixed castes and ethnicities. One was the first girl in her community to go to school to train as a community medical auxiliary. At the health centre, they provide reproductive health services and supervise the female community health volunteers, which has been an important government programme for 30 years. They face many challenges in their work. Uptake of family planning is on the rise among more-educated women but is a challenge for others who want large families and particularly sons. While abortion up to 12 weeks is legal, sex-selective abortions have been banned for 10 years, but *'In our culture, we need a son – the son has to tend to the death rituals of his elders. So even if sex-selective abortions are now illegal and cost more for clandestine operations, people will pay.'* Early marriage is also still a problem, rooted in women's low economic status and lack of education and skills. Low educational levels among women also impact the female community health volunteers' programme, as most volunteers who were initially recruited had no formal education. Current policy is to only recruit women with at least 10th grade education, but it will take some years to reach a critical mass; still only about 1 in 10 volunteers can read and write.

IDs, IGs and small group discussions with women of different ages and backgrounds

Strengthening women's rights through civil society

As part of the opening up of public space accompanying the move towards democracy, the 1990s witnessed a burgeoning of CSOs established to promote social justice and fight inequity of all sorts. We spoke with a number of women and men who were active in CSOs working to promote and safeguard women's human rights in Nepal (see Box 11). All of these demonstrated passionate commitment to social justice and the conviction that collective agency can make a difference in challenging and changing discriminatory norms and practices. This drive was rooted in national experiences and reinforced through international normative frameworks, human rights standards, and legal instruments promoting gender equality.

Box 11. Working to change discriminatory social norms through civil society organisations

Legal reform and advocacy for women's rights

- A number of our participants focused on law reform and advocacy through an influential human rights CSO established in 1995. In order to eliminate all forms of discrimination, this CSO uses law as an instrument to uphold the rights of women, children, minorities and all other marginalised groups, and to move towards a just and equitable society.

One woman in her 50s, in a leadership position in the organisation, became a lawyer to combat the injustices she saw around her and filed her first public interest litigation case for girls' inheritance in 1993. She won the case, arguing that the existing law setting conditions on age and marital status contravened the Constitution and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which Nepal had ratified. It took eight years to get this through and it was tough: it was not easily accepted by the '*patriarchal mind-set*'. MPs (mostly male) voiced loud objections, and people would come up to her and ask: '*Why are you trying to destroy the fabric of society and our social structure? The door of your maternal home will be closed to you.*' This is because the '*ideal daughter*' is seen as one who leaves the property to her brothers, who will care for her as a guardian if she faces problems later in life in marriage. '*If you argue to retain this property for girls as well, you are seen as disruptive.*' But with a strength of conviction stemming from her deep sense of injustice, she persevered. The age requirement was lifted in 2002/3; and the marriage proviso lifted in 2015. The Supreme Court ordered that this be turned into a Bill as part of equal rights legislation.

Among other cases, she was involved in the development of the Gender Equality Act of 2005 as an omnibus Bill, covering many issues; she also worked on the ban on *chhaupaudi* (the practice of isolating girls in menstrual huts during menses), particularly in western Nepal. It took 13 years of advocacy for the government to enact a law on this based on the Supreme Court's directive. She also worked on the issue of marital rape, which she helped to reframe as a sexual offence. During discussion in the Supreme Court, rumours started that she herself was a victim, so she took her husband to a news conference and he spoke out passionately against all forms of violence. After the provision passed, an elderly woman came up to her and told her that she had never before considered marital rape as rape, and said, '*We are happy that you have re-defined this*'. This shows the importance of recasting certain socially accepted practices in a new light that reveals the blatant discrimination and injustice that may lie underneath.

Other issues taken up by colleagues in the same organisation include transitional justice for victims of conflict during the social movements of the 1990s, including justice for women who had been raped – both in communities and among the combatants. One 35-year-old female lawyer explained that many are not able to come forward because of the stigma attached to sexual violence, while some have already started life with another man – marrying into a new family – and do not want to reveal problems from their past. Nevertheless, the legacy of such physical and mental trauma remain. At the same time, some former female combatants have been excluded from their community and religious ceremonies: since they had lived in 'the jungle' (that is, in the bush during the uprisings), it was commonly believed that they were sexually active and impure; while those who were

widowed cannot get remarried. So it can be seen that society has still not accepted them – even 12 years after the peace agreement.

Social norms and subsequent regulations around the labour migration of women have arisen as another critical issue that this young woman lawyer is addressing. While *'society is proud of male foreign employment'*, the situation is more ambiguous for women, many of whom go to Malaysia or the Gulf States for work as housemaids or in sales. But *'society doesn't look highly on girls going abroad for domestic work – most people think they will be involved in sexual activities there'*. And in Nepali cultures, she explains, *'Morality and goodness are all linked up into sexual activities – for women, not for men'*. So women have to hide the reality of their work from their families and communities, going abroad through unofficial channels and leaving themselves open to abuse and exploitation. The CSO the woman works for is arguing that *'There should be a proper rights-based approach because the ban is pushing them into more informal channels, which increases their vulnerability. We need to make our policies and laws more woman-friendly.'*

Young male lawyers working in the same CSO situate their interest in working with a women's human rights organisation within the wider quest for equality, which one of them describes as *'one of the most important aspects of the 21st century ... In this organisation we work not only on gender equality, violence against women and the like, but on overall inclusiveness with a focus on the backward castes.'* They see themselves as allies in women's fight for justice and also as strategically placed to contribute to the struggle. As one points out: *'If you want to teach about women's rights, you need to teach the opposite sex. Just like for Dalits – you have to work with those who suppress them.'* They feel no stigma as men working in a predominantly female organisation: *'We respect women's empowerment and in turn we get respect'*. Some of the key issues they have been working on are around reproductive health rights – to ensure that these are included within fundamental rights, and the citizenship rights movement – lobbying government for the right of single women/mothers to register the citizenship of their child. They note with pride that, *'All of the cases we have argued have been positive'*, but point out that *'there are still many more to advance'*.

Advocacy and support for widows

- **Two participants devote their professional energies** to a CSO that promotes and defends the rights of widows in Nepali society. One woman leader, in her 60s, is a widow herself so has first-hand experience of the discrimination and injustice that many widows face. She noted that there has been resistance to the empowerment of widows because: *'In-laws do not want their daughters-in-law to gain awareness and claim rights!'* Their work has focused on strengthening widows' voice through advocacy, capacity-building and leadership training for widows: *'Women's voices are heard so little. And people do not want the problems of widows and household relations and such to go outside of the private sphere into the public realm of policy'*. Their work also includes: promoting greater access to resources for widows (through monthly allowances from government and savings and loans schemes for single women); reforming laws (particularly around widows' rights to spousal property); and changing discriminatory practices (such as the obligation to wear white and the exclusion from ceremonial rituals).
- **A younger woman in her 30s**, also in a leadership position at the organisation, noted that the situation of widows differs by region but also by education and caste. She locates the source of discrimination against widows within the larger regional context of Hindu traditions of sati, whereby a

widow would be expected to throw herself on the husband's funeral pyre since she is considered the 'half-body' of the husband and expected to take care of him in the after-life. She reports that things are gradually beginning to change, due to the efforts of her organisation and its alliances. Laws have changed recently too – including around property rights, so women can now lobby to get their share of the marital property. But vigilance is still needed as (for example) around a regressive clause in the new Civil Code. Her colleague also highlighted the positive changes that have taken place, largely due to their collective efforts: *'Before, there were no groups for widows to join to share problems and experiences or learn new things or find support – this is the pioneering organisation for this'*.

Women's empowerment through community development

- **A development worker in her late 30s** describes her professional evolution as linked to her passionate commitment to women's empowerment, tracing this to her first job as a field researcher for a health survey in the western part of the country. At age 20, this was the first time she had ever been out of the Kathmandu Valley on her own: *'This was the biggest turning point in my personal and professional life, learning how to survive in life, work things out with a group, and from that point onward, my reserved life disappeared forever'*. It also marked her initiation into gender issues. In one village in the far west where *chhaupadi* was practised, she was shocked when the house owner would not allow her, as a woman, to stay in the house in case she was menstruating, forcing her to stay instead in the local village development committee office. In another village in the east, she happened to touch the pot of an old Dalit woman who was filling her water pot and a Brahmin woman standing behind her in line started screaming at her that now she was polluted. *'I was very angry. I had had some experience of discrimination against Dalits during childhood – for example, my grandfather would not allow my Dalit friends to come into our home, but it was not to that extreme.'* So her mind-set changed through all of this experience, which spurred her to work in the development sector on issues of social transformation.

She has worked with various organisations – both for the United Nations and CSOs – on issues around female literacy and education through the Backward Society Education (BASE) programme, which also deals with bonded labour. She has worked on women's rights more generally, including anti-witchcraft campaigns leading to the criminalisation of witchcraft accusations. She feels a special affinity with rural women, and has forged links for solidarity through rural women's networks. She feels that her personal experiences as a woman growing up and in marriage have helped make her a more transformative worker. And for her, personal transformation has been inextricably linked to her work on social transformation. She recalls that during her master's degree, she had never had a male friend: *'This is how suppressed I was!'* She remembers her father's anger whenever her elder sister brought boys home from school, and to avoid that she never did, as she was always afraid. Now, however, she is surrounded by male colleagues and working well together. *'This is my revolution'*, she stated.

IDs and small group discussion (SGD) with women and men of different ages and backgrounds

Breaking gender barriers in the private sector

A number of participants were active in the private sector, including in domains formerly reserved for men, and have achieved distinction in their fields, serving in many ways as trailblazers and role models for other women. Their stories depict an evolution in the range of career possibilities for women (see Box 12). They also suggest that the drive to achieve individual empowerment and distinction in one's career can contribute to chipping away at social norms that discriminate against women's participation in various professional fields more broadly. And finally, they indicate that some women may bring to their jobs a special concern for other women, and work towards broader collective advancement.

Box 12. Expanding options for women through private enterprise

Business promotion

- A woman in her 40s** is currently head of a national business coordination office – the first woman to hold such a post. She started out her professional life helping her husband with a hotel his family owned in the west of the country, where she also founded and worked for a number of years in an organisation working on women's rights and particularly violence against women. She observed at the time that *'Lots of NGOs were working on issues of abuse and domestic violence and the like, but women need resources to fight for their rights – they have to pay for lawyers to argue their cases in court. So I saw a niche for women's economic empowerment.'* She opened a branch of the Women Entrepreneurs' Associations of Nepal (WEAN), offering skills training to indigenous women. She later joined a national business coordination body, and observed that. *'This was a different world – all men, and businessmen at that – very male, and only one woman!'* In those days, only very small enterprises were owned by women. She gradually learned the ropes and, after three years, was encouraged to put her name forward for board membership. She competed with 14 men for one open position, and won: *'One woman on a board of 56 men!'* She noted that while all the voters were men, they cast their votes for her, which, from her point of view, *'shows that to be successful as a woman you also need male support'* and that such support can be earned through hard work and competence.

In her elected position, she became chair of the women's committee, working at district as well as policy level and helped to introduce new laws and policies. She was then urged to run for vice-president, competing against a man. *'It is difficult as a woman to compete in election campaigns'*, she explained, *'as women are under many more restrictions than men – they cannot go out as male candidates do, for example, and sit around drinking with men'*. Her colleagues were also wondering if her family would really support her in this process and accept all of the requirements of campaigning. And she admits that the campaign was tough, travelling with men all the time. But in the end she won, becoming first senior vice-president, then president – the first woman to serve in a lead position in this body.

When she had first joined as a member, she found that the dynamic of gender differences in the working environment created challenges. She worried, for example, about whether to speak out or not. But now as a leader she does not feel any restrictions – people believed in her strongly enough to vote for her. The journey was tough and challenging, but her leadership has been accepted and the women's entrepreneurship committee continues to grow.

Mountain climbing

- **Two women of the Himalayan Sherpa ethnic group**, renowned for their alpine skills, are ground-breakers for women's mountaineering in Nepal – their exploits in summiting the high peaks standing as metaphors par excellence of women's empowerment through hard work, perseverance and goal-setting.

One of the two, now in her 50s, grew up in a small mountain village and started working as a porter at age 13 when she was taken out of school by her father. She has since risen to become an active tourism entrepreneur, producing two autobiographical books and setting up her own trekking company. She participated in the first women's Everest summit attempt, which created a group of women Everest Team Leaders. As she recounts: *'I started out as a porter and slowly rose up the ranks. The dream of all porters is to become kitchen help so that they can get enough food to eat, so I became kitchen help. The dream of all kitchen girls is to become guides so they won't have to carry equipment; so I became a guide. And the dream of all guides is to have their own agency; so I opened my own with my brother at the age of 28. I went step by step, fulfilling my dreams.'*

However, it was not easy to make her way in this male-dominated field:

"As a girl/woman, I faced a lot a challenges. There were no child rights or women's rights protections at the time and society was very conservative – the village was for men. Male porters only had to worry about carrying their loads, while female porters had to protect themselves from sexual aggression. If not, they would see the results nine months down the line and would be rejected by their families. There was one incident in Annapurna where the cook tried to molest me, but I hit him with a stick and gave him a great wound on his head. On the mountain, as everywhere, you can meet people like God but also like the devil. Another time, working under a fatherly German expedition leader, the Nepali guide tried to rape me, but I resisted. Nevertheless, rumours started back in the village that I had slept with him – all the neighbours were gossiping and my father beat me on my return."

She reflected that women's challenges on the mountain are double and that for a woman, *'her own body is her foe'*, as she has to be constantly on alert to protect herself against male aggression and consequent damage to her reputation. She feels that the experience of motherhood can also affect women's mountaineering experiences – not in a physical sense but in an emotional sense, as women may find it more difficult to detach themselves from their child for long periods away on the mountain. She is currently a leading member of a number of different mountaineering and mountain development organisations in Nepal, including in a government institution responsible for training on mountain-related issues. In this role, she has approached her tasks with the same energy and determination as she does her mountain ascents: *'Sometimes I had to threaten to resign and cried to get my way'*.

The second woman, in her 40s, is the first woman to summit one of the most technically difficult mountain peaks in Nepal, and a strong promoter of women's mountaineering. Growing up in a small village, she had seen her father accompany different trekking expeditions and, later, when they moved to Kathmandu, saw the family struggle economically with small tea shops where she helped out for several years after dropping out of university. She was restless and wanted to travel, so at the age of 19 or 20 (lying to cover up her lack of experience, qualifications and English language ability), she got her

first job as a guide. She slowly picked up other jobs and in 2003 was asked to accompany a team up one of the most technically difficult mountains, which she did in borrowed equipment from her male relatives. The media was waiting for her on her descent and she became famous in Nepal as the first woman to climb that mountain: *'I felt very proud and happy – it was unexpected, like magic, and everything changed after that'*. She went climbing on more and more difficult and higher and higher mountains, always as the first woman.

There were some physical challenges, she noted, but also social challenges. *'This was the social thinking – that as a woman, you should not be out there, exposed on the mountains and surrounded by many men, as in future you may not be able to find a good man, since they will have assumed that you have had relations with many men. But I say that if you want to do something bad, you don't have to go to the mountain to do it – you can do it even if you are guarded at home.'*

She stopped climbing for 5 years after her daughter was born, working instead at the trekking agency she and her husband set up. But the lure of the mountains remained. *'People think that women after marriage and childbirth are not so strong, but I wanted to prove the opposite.'* So for her comeback expedition, she chose a very difficult mountain and, with no exercise or training beforehand, led a group of women friends to become the first women's team that had summited it. *'Both of the other women were also married and mothers – I wanted to send a message,'* she explained.

She has this advice for young girls: *'If you have a dream, nothing is impossible but you have to find your path. It may be difficult, but give it 100%, believe in yourself and don't pay attention to what others say.'* She notes that it is hard for everyone to find sponsors to climb – but especially for women, as people have already *'pre-decided what women can and cannot do'*. Even she and the other two well-known climbers had difficulty finding sponsors – but they did in the end. *'So don't think of yourself as weak'*, she insists to girls.

Travel and tourism business

- **A woman in her mid-40s**, from a Brahmin family, is currently manager in charge of a family travel agency. She took this over with much trepidation on the urging of her husband when the company began to fail after the previous family managers – her brother and brother-in-law – left and pulled their clients out with them. *'Not too many women went into business then'*, she explained. *'The usual occupations were teaching or nursing and the like – some banking.'* And no one in her family aside from her brother had ever been involved in the tourism sector. So it was a challenge. When she took it on, *'There was just an empty office and the company name – no staff, no bookings – nothing. I had young children at home. And at the same time, there was the Maoist movement in the countryside, which affected tourism.'*

She was afraid people would think her husband was foolish for giving such responsibility to an inexperienced woman and was also afraid that she would be blamed for the failure of a heretofore successful business. But she said to herself, *'Well, nothing is impossible – I will learn what to do in this business'*. So between 2003 and 2007/8 she brought the agency back up to its previous level. Of the 2,000 or so registered travel agencies in Nepal, only a handful are run by women. But she explains that she has never felt a particular problem as a woman in this business – men and women basically face the same problems, and she feels that she has always been accorded respect. Moreover, when she took

over the business, it had already been established and had a name for itself so she just had to work to build it up again.

She is now the only woman on the board of the national body that promotes tourism in Nepal, stating modestly that *'It is really just hard work that pays off'*. She has worked hard on the board – becoming known as the 'Iron Lady' for her strong stance on ethical issues – and feels that its work has improved since she joined. She feels that as a woman, although she had no professional training, *'It is also something that comes from inside – the sense of hospitality and the notion that guests are like gods. We learn this from our families and our culture and women may be particularly well-placed to put in practice these principles.'* She is also trying to empower women; most of her office staff are women, and they also employ women trekking guides as well as women city tour guides who have been very successful. Some customers say they chose her agency because she is a woman but also because they see that her staff are well-paid and taken care of. Her whole family is proud of her: even the children who, when she could not be at home all the time to prepare meals for them, would help out without complaint. Her advice to young women: *'You should be confident, have support from your family, work hard and be honest. You have to be strong yourself – not to give loose points to others to seize upon.'*

Other private enterprise

- **A young lawyer in her mid-20s** practices law at a private firm dealing with corporate and criminal cases where she is already senior associate, as she had come in with her advocate's license as well as two years of experience, which makes her senior to others in the firm. She has found no gender discrimination, and in fact there are more women employees at the firm than men. In early experiences at internships in other firms, however, she experienced gender discrimination first-hand when she and a female colleague who had refused a manager's advances were side-lined from important work processes until they were transferred. *'This happens a lot in the corporate world'*, she explained matter-of-factly. Women outnumber men in law school, she says, but often begin dropping out of full-time practice with more high-powered firms because of lack of confidence as well as time constraints when they begin their families. *'So you often find women clustered in family law – dealing with children, divorce, rape and such, while men will go into corporate law, homicides, and take on the "big cases"'. And of course there are pay differentials in the different streams.'* She herself – recently married – wants to wait a couple of years before having children and hopes to go on into international human rights or criminal law.
- **A widow in her 60s** worked for 30 years at a state bank in Kathmandu, and credits this, along with the economic empowerment it gave her, with enabling her to finally move out from under the thumb of harsh in-laws and establish a decent home for herself and her two children. Slowly moving up the ranks, she overcame her initial difficulties in dealing with men at the bank and found support among other women employees who reassured her that *'Whatever men can do women can do also!'* Through successive promotions, she assumed management level and while she found that some men were resistant to taking directives from her as a woman, they never dominated her, misbehaved or disrespected her at work. She liked her job, and particularly enjoyed dealing with clients. Elderly people, for example, would come in to take their pensions and she would listen as they shared their problems and challenges; they trusted her and she gave them counselling. Many were illiterate – particularly the women – and she helped them fill out forms that they would then sign with fingerprints. Women would come in to the bank to open accounts and deposit money accompanied by male relatives but mostly not

their husbands, as privacy was important to them and they did not want to share their accounts with their husbands. It was not easy for women to take out loans as they did not have the collateral – in the form of lands and homes registered in their names, which was required since land and property are, as a rule, in the man's name. So she didn't see many women doing that in the bank. But in her later work with a CSO, they established their own cooperative so that single women could take out loans without collateral – just with a group guarantee.

- **A young woman in her 30s** presents a profile similar to millennials from other parts of the world in having her sights set on establishing her own company. She worked all through her BA in Business Studies at different jobs – something that is quite common and even the rule for most students. As a woman, she did not encounter any discrimination in terms of getting these jobs; however, there was discrimination in pay. She recounted an incident in which her boss paid her less than he had promised at the outset, but she felt she could not object as she was leaving anyway and wanted to maintain good relations. While working on her MBA, she is now planning to launch her own business in cotton and chemical-free sanitary pads and hygiene products for women, in partnership with her sister-in-law. She concedes that it is easier for a man to launch a business today than a woman. To register the business, for example, men may know how to approach the issue of offering a 'commission' better than women: *'They can say, for example, "Let's go out to talk about this over tea", and offer the "commission" then. But how can women or girls do this?'*

IDs with women of different ages and backgrounds

Engaging with teaching and research

A number of our study participants taught for some years at primary school level while pursuing their own studies in higher education. Two have gone on to teach at university level. One has founded her own private research agency and employs a number of young researchers – four of whom participated in our study. One woman of the older generation worked for many years in the university where she got her degree; her daughter thereafter worked at an NGO providing support and schooling to vulnerable children. Their rich and varied experiences highlight both the struggles entailed in achieving higher education and the firm belief in its transformative potential for women and men alike (Box 13).

Box 13. Nurturing the younger generation and contributing to the knowledge base

Struggling against the odds to teach at university

- **A woman in her late 40s** teaches at BA level in Kathmandu. She has aspired to higher education all of her life: it was the one condition she placed on her agreement to marry – that her husband would allow her to continue her studies as long as she wanted. Since then she has worked steadily towards her goal in spite of economic hardships in the family and taking responsibility for her husband's further studies as

well. She started off as a volunteer school teacher in the village school where her father was principal, all the while studying for her BA through private tuition and exams in India. Newly married at the time, she had to overcome obstacles in the form of social norms that discouraged young women from travelling and pursuing higher studies. She then served as vice president of an NGO working on microfinance for women, while studying for her MA and giving birth to her first son. She taught at college level on a part-time basis for four years, struggling against pressure from her in-laws to continue with a more stable job in the village school. When her part-time work turned into a permanent contract, she was able to support her husband in his own further education: *'For me, it was a good investment – having a husband with an engineering certificate would enhance his job prospects'*.

She was later transferred to a teaching college in Kathmandu, and struggled with multiple roles – teaching, caring for her two children, and hosting relatives from her home community in Terai. Nevertheless, she persevered, and moved on to a PhD at the same time as her husband was pursuing his Master's. She has now been teaching social philosophy and ethics at BA level in Kathmandu for 14 years. She notes that not many students choose to study this topic, as *'Philosophy doesn't earn money and you need time to think, which is difficult in the current economic period, so most students are pushed into more practical or technical fields to earn money'*. But they have started to establish philosophy as a study topic at intermediary level, so this will be one avenue that will be opening up in terms of positions. She reported that *'I am still not satisfied and want to go further in knowledge,'* with plans now to study law.

Promoting gender studies

- **A university professor in her 40s** with a doctorate in gender studies has been instrumental in establishing the subject as a university discipline, working with a group that had been inspired by a six-week intensive training course supported by an external project. When the course was first introduced, there were only a few students who had an inkling of the key concepts involved, but slowly a critical mass has been building up as the course induces critical analysis of one's experiences within the broader community. She often tells her students that *'This is about the little space that you create – the little change that you make and the new awareness you have built and then, as in a relay race, you pass the baton on to others'*.

Revealing gender norms through research

- It is clear from our discussions with the director and staff of a private research institute that engagement in research contributes not only to evidence-based policy dialogues around gender norms and behaviours, but also to heightened personal awareness of such norms and how they shape society. The director notes that the research she conducted on adolescent girls in Nepal coincided with the time that her own daughter was entering adolescence, contributing to her awareness as a mother of the gendered nature of the challenges of this life stage, and helping her to recast her own experiences as an adolescent in light of her new understanding of the power of social norms. The comparative findings from different country studies on adolescents that emerged from the research project she was engaged in from Nepal also opened her eyes to the different gendered norms and practices prevalent in different socio-cultural settings.

Female researchers at the institute also testified to the power of revelations arising from the various field studies they have been engaged in. Their awareness of both caste differentials and gender differentials within castes was sharpened through findings from a study among the Dalit in Terai, where girls' education was in jeopardy because they were sent to low-quality government schools while their

brothers were sent to private, English-medium schools. Religious differences also came to the fore, through findings that among Muslim women, the daughter-in-law is confined to the courtyard – basically purdah – after the birth of the first child as a means of maintaining purity. Such powerful social norms operating at this level led them to conclude that efforts to promote gender equality should start with socialisation processes within the family.

Working in university administration

- **A woman now in her 70s** worked for 32 years in university administration in Kathmandu where she earned both her intermediate diploma and her BA in food and nutrition – combining this with her job as well as raising a family. She enjoyed her work in the administration, where she encountered colleagues from different castes and ethnic groups, becoming friends with all. Others would say she could blend in with each *'like turmeric, which goes well in all vegetables'*. This was important to her as she had eloped with a Newar man in an inter-caste marriage that caused a considerable rift for a time with her family. However, it was in this job that she encountered for the first time a religious movement that has since become the centre of her life. Her work at the university therefore provided both a solid income, allowing her to contribute equally to the upkeep of her family, and a platform for social mixing and the pursuit of new ideas that she could not have found elsewhere.

Helping vulnerable girls through schooling

- **A woman in her 40s** worked as head teacher for 14 years at a non-governmental institution and school for displaced children, orphans and trafficked returnees. She started the job when she was pregnant with her son as she needed the income, and was quickly promoted to the post of headmistress. The school included rescued girls who had been trafficked to India, victims of conflict, and HIV-positive children whose mothers were sex workers. They were supported in high school sponsorship and job placement, and many have now secured jobs in various fields. She is still in touch with many of her former students via Facebook.

IDIs, IGIs, and small group discussions (SGD) with women of different ages and backgrounds

Analysis of progress moving forward

Positive changes in gender norms and practices

Study participants mostly agreed that much progress has been achieved over time in Nepal. This is evident in: rising levels of education for girls as more parents see the value of educating daughters and sons and as more educational opportunities open up at all levels; greater access to a wide range of information leading to heightened awareness of rights; greater acceptance of women in politics and public life; expanded economic opportunities for women, including in domains previously reserved for men; and significant improvements in reproductive health care and rights.

There has also been some relaxation of marriage arrangements and practices, with girls having more of a say in when and whom they marry, and a slow erosion of the mobility restrictions that have characterised the lives of women and girls. The value of the girl child seems to be more accepted today, and the most vulnerable categories of women, such as minority women and widows, are becoming more empowered to speak out against the weight of oppressive norms and attitudes.

Many of our study participants pointed to such changes in their own lives and experiences, while intergenerational interviews also revealed significant changes over time. The voices represented in Box 14 capture some of these observations and experiences.

Box 14. Positive changes in critical capability domains

Rising levels of education

- 'Women are educated now and can get jobs and go out – even working outside of the country. But I cannot even use a smartphone and am restricted therefore to the landline! I cannot explain everything because I am not educated ... My daughter is standing on her own feet. She is economically empowered, and I am happy about that. Even my granddaughter is outside of the country now studying on a scholarship.' (IGI, grandmother)
- 'My mother was simple – she knew nothing. She just married as a young girl an older fellow like my father who already had two children – just like a cow. In my time, however, I knew the value of education and why it was needed for both boys and girls and why parents should send out both sons and daughters to get knowledge. In my daughters' time it is also acknowledged that everyone has to go to school and read. As for my granddaughters, what can I say? I am no use!' (IGI, grandmother)
- 'I think the change in the thoughts of my generation has come about mainly due to education and also due to the awareness that we get every day through social media. We are getting vast experiences apart from only the schooling knowledge. Everything has changed in our time as compared to our grandparents' time. There are changes in culture and behaviour as well. There are men these days who do not feel any differences between a man and a woman.' (IGI, granddaughter)

Enhanced political voice and leadership

- 'There are reservations and general representation from political level to policy-making, through which women are given chances to forward their views, ideas and their voice.' (FGD, MA students)
- 'Women's representation in political affairs has risen through the 33% quota at provincial and federal levels and 40% reservation as candidates at the local level. This is the only country in the region where this system is actually in practice and women are doing good jobs.' (IDI, development worker)
- 'Many of the village women from cooperatives have now entered local government because they have good leadership skills that they have learned here.' (IDI, government worker)

Economic empowerment

- 'If a woman can earn, she does not have to look pleadingly into the faces of others, dependent on them to support her. Now I am also getting a pension and have money for the first time. I do not have to ask my family for money all the time – I can have visitors over and buy things to offer them' (IGI, grandmother and widow)
- 'More opportunities are there – women even get priority for jobs through policies of positive discrimination [adverts in the newspaper stipulate that priority would be given to women, for example], even though once hired they get lower pay!' (IGI, granddaughter-in-law)
- 'If in a marriage a woman has a job and the man does not, she will dominate because when a woman is earning she feels more confidence and voice and independence. So economic empowerment is important for all.' (FGD, MA students)

Improved sexual and reproductive health rights and care

- 'Nowadays in Kathmandu, the woman visits the doctor as soon as she is one month pregnant – but back there [in the village in her day] if they die, they die.' (IGI, grandmother)
- 'In the far west, [where the practice of chhaupadi, or isolation of menstruating women has been most common] women themselves have destroyed the chhaupadi huts.' (Small group discussion, women health workers)

Some loosening in marriage practices, relations and expectations

- 'You don't need to help me find a husband – I can do this by myself.' (IDI, civil society officer)
- 'If I am not economically empowered and I marry and go into my in-laws' home to live, I will be dependent on them and thus restricted.' (IDI, civil society officer)
- 'In our grandparents' and parents' time the tradition was for arranged marriages and families decided before the bride or groom met. In our generation, everyone – relatives, parents – are happy to allow us to get married on their own, but they still need to meet the boy to make sure he is OK. As long as they are from the same caste, parents will allow love marriages and today, 60%–70% are love marriages.' (FGD, MA students)
- 'Once you have an MA is a good age now for marriage for both men and women.' (FGD, MA students)
- 'My husband used to have a business, but when we had our child we had to decide who would give up work to stay at home as primary caregiver as they have to house help. My husband proudly identifies himself as a house-husband. He is not very educated in a formal sense, but in a spiritual sense, yes – he is enlightened. There is not a bit of discrimination caused by his ego as with most other men. He doesn't care what others say and even washes my clothes. When asked where her parents are, our daughter has started replying "Mother is working at the office and father is cooking in the kitchen." Our daughter has always seen this and so she considers it normal. She will say when impatient with us, "Mama, go to your laptop. Papa, go to the kitchen!" Through our example, we may be slowly changing the thinking of others.' (IDI, CSO officer)

- 'Men are more supportive in the household these days.' (IGI, granddaughter-in-law)

Greater assertiveness and awareness of rights

- 'In earlier times, women were not aware of these rights and could not speak. They were scared and had no place to present their problems and no people who would listen to them.' (IDI, political leader)
- 'When her daughter was born, she didn't know she had to do register the birth within 35 days. Then her uncle told her and she went to the district office where they told her she had to bring in her husband, so she went all the way back. But she really didn't have to. When her daughter reached age 16, she went to that same VDC [village development committee] officer and he asked her to bring her husband, but now she knew all of the processes and knew that her husband did not have to be there, so she argued back and within just hours she got the certificate!' (IDI, development worker, recounting the words of a rural woman who had participated in awareness-raising campaigns)
- 'Earlier, it had been very difficult for widows to get out of the house. It was also hard to say you were a widow because there was stigma, and people treated widows very badly. Society is patriarchal – only the voice of the man is heard. If there is no male in your house, who will speak for you, and if you cannot earn, what are you for? Also, widows are believed to bring bad luck, and older widows especially. But now widows can say, I am a single woman, I have my own group, I am raising my children. Also, now widows do not always have to wear white, so they are not so stigmatised in public places. Before, there were no groups for widows to join to share problems and experiences or learn new things or find support – this is the pioneering organisation for this.' (IDI, CSO officer, widow)

Increased mobility, autonomy and value for the girl child

- 'To be born a woman used to be considered a curse [from the God Indra]. So when my own first child was a boy, I was happy – I didn't want a daughter. And the same with the second. Now, however, I feel that I was totally wrong – that is the change that has occurred in me!!!' (IDI, government official)
- 'Girls now have wings like a scooter! Girls and women can now travel alone from place to place at any time – whereas before you could not go out after a certain hour.' (IGI, mother)
- 'There is easier interaction now with boys and others outside of the family.' (IGI, mother)
- 'Yes, it is now much better than before. In our grandmothers' time, women's mobility was restricted – they couldn't go out. In our mothers' time, they could go out a little. Now we can go out and express ourselves and our daughters' generation will continue to expand.' (Small group discussion, minority women ward representatives)

IDs, IGIs, FGDs and small group discussions (SGD) with women of different ages and backgrounds

Key enabling factors

A broad range of factors have contributed to these positive changes (see Box 15). Moving to urban Kathmandu from rural settings was seen as one factor contributing to change across generations. The greater educational opportunities, economic choices and socialisation opportunities associated with urban areas has facilitated transformation in some of the social norms and expectations around girls and women. This then created a ripple effect, as women's higher levels of education and greater participation in work and professions at all levels empowered them to exercise choices and challenge norms. Access to higher education, in turn, served as a foundation for women and girls to seize opportunities in the economic, political and social spheres that were hitherto closed off to them. Along the way, family support and encouragement by others have also been essential enabling factors for women, in the form of educated or enlightened parents, supportive teachers, gender-sensitive husbands and understanding in-laws.

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

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

At the collective level, women's participation in the social movements of the 1990s, including the drive towards democracy and the revolutionary fervour against all social injustices, helped to raise awareness of gender discrimination and to mobilise action against it. This was also a time when civil society flourished, with a number of new CSOs established to promote women's rights. Women's leadership in advocacy efforts and law reform undertaken by these CSOs have all distinctly contributed to moving the agenda forward, as have government efforts to promote women in development.

Participation in global debates about women and development and in fora such as the Beijing World Conference on Women, coupled with the adoption of international instruments such as CEDAW, helped shape the national agenda and situate the struggle of Nepali women within a wider, global movement.

Enshrining women's rights in law – through the Constitution and sector-specific laws, as well as in broad-based policies – has been critical to the progress achieved. Women have gained legal protection from violence, enhanced property rights, safeguards on political participation and representation, and a new sense of their own human rights through greater awareness and

access to information. Women from minority groups, and particularly vulnerable categories such as widows, have also gained enhanced protection and voice, though there remain areas for improvement in achieving real equality.

Box 15. Factors contributing to positive changes

The social movements of the 1990s

- 'After the coming of democracy, NGOs flourished and also businesses flourished. As democracy came in you could reach the grassroots. There was a sense of excitement and solidarity.' (IDI, business leader)
- 'There was a desire for equality from way back before the movement, but the voice for equality came out gradually after the movement. Awareness has risen – education over time has contributed to this. To some extent the movement has also contributed to awareness but did not get a good platform to be implemented. Nevertheless, women got a sense of self-identity and representation.' (Small group discussion, male CSO staff)

Women's political participation and unity around common causes

- 'We were afraid that men with their patriarchal mind-set would not put in women's rights [in the Constitution], so we formed a women's caucus to work on this. We did not always agree on everything, but we did agree on women's rights. We were worried that men were leaving women out and that gave us energy to overcome our differences.' (IDI, political leader)

Law reform

- New civil and criminal codes have been developed and contradictory laws repealed, 'with 16 new rights now encoded in law'. (Small group discussion, male CSO staff)
- 'There have been significant changes in the laws, with age and chastity/remarriage conditions lifted on widows' rights to their share of spousal property (though the new Civil Code needs to be further scrutinised on this matter); and widows no longer need the consent of their children to sell their own property.' (IDI, CSO officer, widow)

Rising awareness and mobilisation through new institutions and communication

- 'The international and national women's movements have contributed to awareness-raising on and among women – this includes through social media such as Facebook but also through mainstream media. Even in rural areas where there may be no social media or TV, they have progressive FM radio programmes that raise awareness. CSOs also raise awareness through their programmes out in rural areas.' (Small group discussion, male CSO staff)
- 'FWLD [the Forum for Women, Law and Development] was founded in 1994 and at first was one of the few CSOs working for women's rights. FWLD had its first landmark case around married women's property rights. After that case and further conflict victim cases, civil society started raising voices and people started demanding amendments of the Constitution and the laws – including with a focus on women and backward places.' (Small group discussion, male CSO staff)

- 'Before, there were no groups for widows to join to share problems and experiences or learn new things or find support – the Women's Human Rights Single Women's Group is the pioneering organisation for this.' (IDI, CSO officer)

Women's individual agency

- On her parents' objection to her attending college an hour away from her village, one woman '*... went on a "pretend" hunger strike (eating only in secret) and crying every day until they relented*'. She was one of the few girls in her circle who felt outrage at gender discrimination; most of her friends simply accepted it as '*normal*'. (IDI, CSO officer)
- On how she overcame the 'shame' and stigma of attending school after menstruating, '*I am a person who has been combative from the outset*'. (IGI, grandmother)
- On rejecting her family's efforts to arrange her marriage, '*You don't need to help me find a husband – I can do this by myself*'. (IDI, CSO officer)
- On breaking away from her husband: '*I would have been a prisoner in the marriage, which subsequently broke up, but with economic independence, I could, and did, ask for a divorce*'. (IDI, mountaineer)
- On refusing to change her name after marriage, '*Why should I? That is my identity since I was born, so why should I change it? I have been a rebel on this*'. (CSO, development worker)

Supportive family members, mentors and men

- 'My father – a headmaster in the village – was very interested in education and encouraged me as well to be a role model for other children in the village.' (IDI, private sector entrepreneur)
- 'My mother, a "feminist" from a Brahmin family, valued education and had no hesitation in enrolling me in a prestigious English-medium private school while my younger brother was at a government school because I was a harder worker.' (IDI, CSO activist)
- 'My parents wanted to withdraw me from school but my teacher convinced them to let me stay.' (IDI, health worker)
- 'The teacher told me I would be a leader, and that encouraged me.' (IDI, political leader)
- 'My father was a high school teacher and wanted his daughter to be different – not to conform to the regular framework of other girls. When my mother came back from a visit to Kathmandu, she said she wanted me to become a policewoman, like one she had seen riding on a horse. But my father said, "Why traffic police – better to be a lawyer!"' (IDI, political leader)
- 'My husband agreed to me continuing my BA after marriage, and thereafter supported me in my MA, PhD and post-doc in social sciences ... Along the way, we changed each other.' (IDI, researcher)

- 'I consider myself a very lucky lady from the beginning as both my paternal family and my husband's family encouraged me and there is mutual respect between myself, my father, my husband and my son – everyone equal ... We are all helping each other.' (IDI, private sector entrepreneur)
- 'We respect women's empowerment and in turn we get respect.' (Small group discussion, male CSO officers working on women's rights)

Analysis of obstacles and constraints

Key obstacles and constraints

In spite of the significant progress, there remain substantial obstacles at many levels to achieving full gender equality and empowerment for women. Some of these derive from deep-rooted norms and practices linked to the predominantly patriarchal social structures of Nepal, based on patrilineal inheritance, patrilocal residence, and son preference, as well as the gendered division of responsibilities and resources within the household and community. Within this context, women's sexuality and social behaviour is still tightly controlled, as women are expected to uphold the family's reputation and the reputation of men in their household.

While individual women are able to negotiate around some of the discriminatory norms contributing to the injustices and limitations imposed by Nepal's patriarchal social structures, and collective effort is chipping away at some of the foundations, many women still struggle for equality. They are working hard to fulfil both the changing expectations and demands of economic empowerment and social responsibilities within the family and extended household.

Other challenges highlighted by our study participants include weak implementation of progressive laws and policies that have been developed with such hope for change. This is coupled with continuing gaps in the legal protection of rights, particularly around property and citizenship. Despite the significant progress achieved and the quotas established for women's effective political representation and voice at all levels, there remain challenges in this regard. The current struggles of women trying to exert leadership positions within party structures are contrasted with the earlier revolutionary euphoria, when women felt that participation was somewhat easier.

And finally, given Nepal's extremely diverse socio-cultural and economic settings, development has been uneven, with substantial disparities linked to caste and class, ethnicity, religion, region, urban/rural location, educational attainment and social status (for example, the inferior social and economic status of widows, which – though greatly improved – continues to confer additional vulnerability on many women). Widespread poverty continues to set limitations on the fulfilment of rights for men and women alike.

‘Sticky’ norms and obstacles

Study participants highlight a number of particularly ‘sticky norms’ and obstacles that hinder progress towards gender equality and women’s empowerment in Nepal (Box 16).

Box 162. ‘Sticky norms’ and obstacles to progress in changing gender norms

The enduring strength of gender norms around marriage, household and family

- ‘Parents still think of daughters as a burden and feel a lightness and relief when they are married off ... Daughters are the prestige of the family and if they do something bad or elope, it reflects badly on the family, so there is a sense of relief when she is married off and parents don’t have to worry about her anymore.’ (IGI, grandmother)
- ‘*Stereotyped mentalities have not disappeared.*’ (KII, university professor, pointing to an insurance advertisement showing a family saving for a son’s education and a daughter’s marriage)
- ‘If you have a boyfriend but wait too long [to get married] – as sometimes your boyfriend decides to marry someone else in the interim – afterwards you will not only be too old for others’ consideration, but you will be seen as no longer a virgin, which is still a strong social norm.’ (IDI, CSO officer)
- ‘The work of girls was not seen as studying, but of staying home. Studying was only for the big jobs that were the ones requiring going out – and those were for men.’ (IDI, political leader)
- ‘In women’s lives, everything is dependent on family issues – the in-laws, one’s own parents, the husband, the children – it is all tangled up ... Yes, we are lucky to have been educated and have experience, but there are also a lot of pressures building up. The in-laws now expect the daughter-in-law to have a job, earn income, but they also expect her at home, so she is in a sort of trap as the earlier social expectations have remained the same.’ It was different in her mother’s time, when women were only proactive in the family realm: ‘Now you need to be proactive in both ... Moreover, these family or social responsibilities are different from in the West as they embrace a wider circle – including all of the in-laws in the now extended family, which entails many social obligations, including ceremonial obligations and entertaining as well as daily obligations. A woman is not only a wife, mother and daughter, but a daughter-in-law and sister-in-law, and all of these relationships must be maintained. If you choose to live alone as a couple, people will fall against you. There will be rumours and gossip against the family. The daughter-in-law represents the prestige of the in-laws in society. If you are good and well-behaved and meet social expectations, the in-laws take that as a positive reflection on them. If you are not – they see it as a negative reflection on your maternal family. So how you handle these relationships is central. While men have the pressure of earning and may be caught in pressures between the wife and his family, it doesn’t affect his career as it does for women.’ (IDI, young private sector lawyer)
- ‘We must also acknowledge in gender that there can be dominance of women over women – for example, the mother-in-law over the daughter-in-law. Girls before marriage are worshipped as a goddess and after marriage are dominated by the mother-in-law.’ (FGD, MA students)

- Women have internalised gender norms within the household: 'In the household, boys may want to help but it is our mentality that we do not allow them. I, for example, feel uncomfortable when my husband tries to help me in the kitchen. My son, though, knows how to do everything and I think that he will be able to help his wife in the household responsibilities.' (IDI, college professor)
- 'Our expectations these days [as women] are different – we are more career-oriented than family-minded, though still women are expected to do both ... And my husband does not want to help out at all at home. Men's expectations of wives are not really changing – my husband does want me to be a career success but also to provide care in the family.' (IGI, granddaughter-in-law)
- 'Women have a lot of problems, Man can earn and just send money home, but women have to keep relationships, deal with problems in the home ... People come and you have to welcome them, etc. Also, men can go and do whatever they want – they don't have anything to tie them down. But women always have children or household work to tie them down.' (IGI, grandmother)
- 'Women's voices are heard so little. And people do not want the problems of widows and household relations and such to go outside of the private sphere into the public realm of policy'. (IDI, CSO worker, widow)
- 'There are also still some among the young generations who follow the legacy of the parents. I have met men who have the patriarchal thought and I stay away from them because they will never change their thought even when you try to explain to them.' (IGI, granddaughter)

Social attitudes around women's sexuality

- 'A woman's reputation is like water in a yam's leaves – even a small slip and it will fall off.' (IDI, researcher)
- A key obstacle to progress is 'woman's lack of rights over her body'. (FGD, MA students)
- 'For a woman, her own body is her foe!' (IDI, mountaineer)
- 'In Nepali cultures, morality and goodness are all linked up into sexual activities – for women, not for men.' (IDI, CSO officer)
- 'Society has still not accepted women rebels – even 12 years after the peace agreement. They are excluded from religious ceremonies: since they had lived in the jungle it was commonly believed that they were sexually active and impure, and also as widows cannot get remarried.' (IDI, CSO officer)
- 'Women who have been raped are not able to come forward because of the stigma attached to sexual violence, and some have already started life with another man – marrying into a new family – and want to hide the problems from the past, but the physical and psychological sequels remain.' (IDI, CSO officer)
- 'Society feels that women should save themselves – if they were good women, they would not suffer abuse. They don't see the need to change male behaviour. So women are facing problems with their biology.' (IDI, government official)

- 'If the man is abroad, the in-laws will be constantly observing the wife's behaviour and trying to control her – very suspicious.' (IDI, private sector lawyer)
- 'When menstruation started, I knew that I was not allowed to touch certain things in the kitchen, water or statues of the gods.' (IDI, researcher)
- 'A girl who was menstruating was considered dirty and could not mingle with others or touch other things ... Besides, it was felt that by the time a girl starts menstruating, it is time for marriage.' (IGI, grandmother)
- 'Nepalese society arises from the sati system, where a widow would be expected to throw herself on the funeral pyre of her deceased husband. This stems from Hindu mythology in which a wife is considered the half body of the husband and where the deceased husband is believed to require a caregiver when he dies. Remarriage of widows was thus considered anathema and also because when a father gives a girl's hand in marriage to another family, she is expected to be a virgin who will start a pure blood line (a "new universe") for her husband's family. But if that role is not needed or possible anymore, the woman cannot create another universe for someone. Moreover, under patriarchal systems, a wife's body is taken as the husband's property. So if a widow remarries and has sex with another, she will be sullyng the man's family and name.' (IDI, CSO officer)

Continued son preference

- 'In our culture, we need a son – the son has to tend to the death rituals of his elders. So even if sex-selective abortions are now illegal and cost more for clandestine operations, people will pay.' (Small group discussion, women health workers)
- 'In Hindu culture, only a son can open the door of heaven for the mother and father.' (FGD, MA students)

Obstacles to women's political participation and leadership

- 'It is difficult as a woman to compete in election campaigns. As women are under many more restrictions than men – they cannot go out as male candidates do, for example, and sit around drinking with men.' (IDI, business leader)
- 'There is a general feeling that things are easier for women during times of peace. But actually, for example, women were more represented among the Maoists – 40% – and everything was tolerated. But now, after the peace process, they have barely 15%. So it seems that the forest is a good place for women, but not society. When women are linked back into society it becomes more difficult for them ... Political parties are the product of that same society, so what is inherent in society is there too.' (IDI, political leader)
- 'All of the women in the movement were young and now they have gone back to their household roles – busy with families and children ... We have no muscle, no money – no relations with big contributors – so it is difficult to compete in elections.' (IDI, political leader)
- 'The reserved seats for women [proportional reservations] are not as powerful as the "first past the post" positions, which are largely held by men'. (IDI, development worker)

- ‘Just having women in government or positions of power does not ensure that they will work to promote gender-sensitive policies, as even women may not be gender-sensitive.’ (KII, university professor)
- ‘Do you work within the party to make women strong or work with other parties to make women’s issues strong? If you choose that latter path, ‘Women are seen as having a separate group and not obeying/following the party line.’ (IDI, political leader)
- Gender equality in political representation ‘is in the name of quota and reservations only ... like giving out chocolates to make people happy, but not changing the actual structure of the system ... The government is hyping the fact that there is a woman president and speaker of the house, etc. but at the grassroots level there is just 2% representation where 50% is needed.’ (FGD, MA students)
- ‘Even when we have women representatives, we always have to fight for things – men might not say no to us outright, but they will go around and around and in the end their voice prevails. Also within the party [when we raise these issues] we are made to feel that we are going against the family ... So people say women are now represented in government, but we aren’t really.’ (Small group discussion, minority women’s representative)
- ‘It is just talk – and we are still struggling with this. Men are resisting this because, of course, if women come in, men will go out.’ (IDI, political leader)
- ‘This shows the strength of the patriarchal mind-set – as long as the older generation is there, this will not be changed easily. Parliament is mostly male – there is a 33% obligatory representation by women, but women parliamentarians themselves are not always clear about things regarding gender discrimination.’ (IDI, CSO officer)

Weak implementation of laws and policies

- ‘Much has been said in policy and plans but less is being done in reality ... There are very good documents and papers at policy level as well as rules and regulations. But progress is very weak in implementation ... There is a gap between the actions of the government in terms of policies, proclamations and laws – which are progressive – and society at the grassroots.’ (FGD, MA students)
- ‘People never see policies – they are just flying about in rumours. Even service providers don’t know them.’ (IDI, development worker)
- ‘There are good laws and policies in place, but they are not enacted/implemented. This is due to a number of factors including: political instability; lack of political or bureaucratic will; lack of awareness on the part of women, leaving them unable to claim their rights.’ (IDI, development worker)
- ‘Laws have to be implemented in full: law plus implementation = change.’ (Small group discussion, minority women ward representatives)

- ‘So theoretically, there are laws, policies and regulations – the technical parts that are there; but practically, there are problems in moving ahead. Cases do not even reach the police yet – the problem starts with under-reporting, so we cannot even talk yet of police readiness to enforce / implement the laws ... Implementation of progressive laws is impeded by cultural beliefs.’ (Small group discussion, male CSO staff)
- ‘We are still working on implementation. And one day it will be possible.’ (IDI, political leader)
- ‘Although there are laws now, culture is deep-rooted ... The law has changed before social mind-sets have changed.’ (FGD, MA students)
- ‘Nowadays, you cannot even talk about chhaupadi in the communities that practise it ... Cultural norms are strong and will fight back.’ (IDI, government official)

Continuing gaps in law and policy and some regression

- ‘In the Constitution, while the first article is about citizenship, there is huge discrimination in women not being able to transmit citizenship to their children unless the husband consents and signs. When a child reaches age 16, the parent has to go to the district office to fill out a form and has to fill in the father’s name. But if the father is not around, or did not contribute at all to the child’s upbringing, why should a woman be obliged to put his name? In cases of divorce, rape or single women, this is highly problematic and in these cases they have to put down “unidentified father”, which can create a problem for the child later on. They don’t, on the other hand, ask for the name of the mother.’ (IDI, development worker)
- Under the new law that allows widow remarriage, the deceased husband’s family is now trying to get rid of the widow by marrying her off to someone else! So constant vigilance is needed, and that is why in addition to legal reform, a key thing is to ‘change the mindset’. (IDI, CSO officer)
- Some issues ‘still manifest blatant patriarchy and some are moving backwards’, particularly over the past two years: ‘Women thought that now that we have these rights, they can never be taken away from us. We became complacent and that is when our rights have started to erode. They also started to erode when our backs were turned and we started focusing on other issues (for example, citizenship rights). And now the Court has stopped showing us Bills in advance – they pass them “through the back door” before they can mobilise public discussion on them. This is because the government feels threatened by women.’ (IDI, CSO officer)

Uneven development and the intersectionality of social identities

- ‘Gender equality is progressing more in urban areas than in rural areas. Lack of education and ingrained cultural values and norms are the reasons for gender discrimination.’ (FGD, MA students)
- ‘In many rural areas, girls are still expected to marry early and drop out of school – but not in cities.’ (IDI, college professor)
- ‘Progress is faster in urban environments: social transformation works better in and is facilitated by mixed societies.’ (IDI, government officer)

- 'At the same time, regional, ethnic and religious differences can cross-cut the urban/rural divide and there are larger problems of social inclusion more generally along with issues of poverty and economic inequality.' (FGD, MA students)
- 'There are issues of religion, caste, ethnicity, gender and class so in a densely packed society – how to peel away all of these layers to touch the real problems? You can never get to the root of the problem so when we get to the implementation level we cannot separate these things out.' (IDI, government official)

Conclusions and recommendations

What we have learned

The diverse experiences narrated by our study participants and their perceptions and analyses of changes over time in discriminatory gender norms, attitudes and practices in Nepal suggest that many positive changes have occurred. As norms around the value of girls and women's rights change, rising levels of education for girls, expanded economic opportunities for women, increased political voice, and improved SRH services have contributed to empowerment in key capability domains.

These positive changes have been fuelled by the social movements of the 1990s ushering in a period of collective action around law reform and societal change prioritising equity, participation and inclusion. Women's collective agency as a force for change within new institutions, government services and political structures has been accompanied by individual agency and determination to surpass gendered boundaries in socio-cultural, economic and political life.

For urban women in particular, who were the focus of our study, the changeover from village-based agrarian economies to an urban environment characterised by greater social mixing, opportunities to pursue different types of jobs, and greater availability of services has contributed to their ability to shift social norms and expectations around the 'proper' place of women in the household and society. Yet even rural women, as we saw from our two mountaineering examples, have managed to forge new pathways for autonomy and development within professions formerly reserved for men.

Nevertheless, it is also clear from our research that significant challenges remain. Cultural norms are 'sticky', particularly around issues to do with marriage and the household, women's ownership of property and assets, women's sexuality, and women exercising power in politics and the public sphere. Ideological underpinnings that favour men explain the continued tendency for son preference and the subordination of women in certain domains. Changes have, moreover, been uneven, with some groups or categories of women able to advance more easily than others. The enactment of progressive laws and policy has not always been

accompanied by actual change on the ground, and certain patterns of resistance seem to be ingrained in political and social structures that reflect broader social norms.

The way forward

Participants were clear that the way forward requires continued, broad-based efforts around social mobilisation and awareness-raising as a priority, to try to retain and further the momentum towards equity and inclusion created by the social movements of the 1990s. Further safeguarding of rights in law is needed, as well as much greater attention to the implementation and enactment of laws and policies on the ground.

Many participants suggested that integrated approaches to development are critical to moving the agenda forward, since women's empowerment is a complex whole with intertwining social, economic and political dimensions. And finally, given both the diversity of socio-cultural settings and structures as well as the disparities that mark women's status and development in Nepal, there is a need for differentiated, context-specific approaches that start from the bottom-up and take into account women's own voices and priorities for change.

Box 17. Strategic priorities moving forward

Strengthening enactment and implementation of laws and policies

- Current priorities for continuing law reform include issues around women's citizenship rights and property as well as protection from all forms of violence. Further work is also needed to address elements of discrimination that have crept into the Civil Code, particularly around divorce and widowhood. Public awareness of laws needs to be strengthened, including through community dialogues that could help to address some of the cultural concerns and resistance to particular laws. And finally, monitoring mechanisms need to be established for the implementation of laws and policies, and enforcement measures should be strengthened.

Enhancing women's voice and agency through political participation, leadership and capacity-building

- Building on the already strong basis in law for women's representation in politics and government, further efforts are needed to strengthen their party participation and leadership roles, to amplify their voices at all levels, and to forge and sustain ever-stronger coalitions to identify and work together on priority issues for women. Stronger efforts could be made to create more of a 'movement' around gender justice and women's rights, with government, politicians, representatives of civil society and the private sector joining forces in collective effort and agency. Women's entry into the public domain must be further supported through enhanced leadership training, supportive policies, and efforts to make political processes more 'woman-friendly'. Male resistance to women moving into positions of power must be recognised and addressed – through dialogue and persuasion, but also through laws and regulations that are monitored and implemented. Preparing women and men to share power can start at an early age – for example, in schools and student governance bodies, where principles of gender equality should be promoted and observed.

Continuing social mobilisation and awareness-raising at all levels

- Nepal's democracy has been borne out of the social movements and revolutionary consciousness that marked the transition from the past and has been animated by the quest for expanded social justice, inclusion and solidarity. The struggle for women's rights has been set within this wider struggle and, in both efforts, activists have focused on social mobilisation and awareness-raising to engage individuals and communities in a broad-based movement. The challenge now is to continue such mobilisation and awareness-raising beyond the 'revolutionary' period, anchoring it in structures of government, civil society and the media in order to sustain momentum and its transformative potential.

Women's collective agency to advocate on issues that concern them can itself be a potent force for change and can be further supported through networking, institution-building and knowledge creation and transmission. Other spaces are equally important, including schools, where girls and boys can be guided in confrontations with gender-based discrimination, as well as the family, where gender-equitable parenting and household organisation can establish the foundations for social transformation. As one study respondent put it, transformation has to start with mothers teaching their sons to respect women: *'If not, it is like pouring water into a glass that is already full – it will just flow out'* (IGI, granddaughter-in-law). It also needs to arise from parents instilling confidence in their daughters, advising them that:

"You have to be confident that you can do any task that men can do. There are only biological differences – nothing else. Just work hard, be positive" (IDI, business leader). And "You also need to be stubborn. My mother used to say I was naughty, but now she is proud of me! We should not keep girls in [coddle them or shelter them from challenges] but send them out to make them strong. We have part of God in us and we contribute to our nation" (IDI, mountaineer).

Expanding opportunities for education, training and economic empowerment

Education has been a key driver of social transformation and the education of girls is a prerequisite for their own empowerment as well as the social development of their communities. Addressing remaining barriers in both the supply and demand for quality education throughout the country is a key priority, with specific attention to areas marked by educational deficits and particular challenges. Enhancement of quality at all levels, and equitable expansion of higher educational opportunities for girls are other key priorities. Further education is directly linked with job prospects and without it, girls will be deprived of options for economic empowerment. As one study participant put it: *'You cannot have empowerment without education but also cannot have education without empowerment, so the two must be pursued equally'* (small group discussion, women minority ward representatives). Economic empowerment is in itself a key priority. *'Unless you have that, nothing will work. Women need money for everything'* (small group discussion, women minority representatives).

Adopting integrated and decentralised approaches adapted to different socio-cultural contexts

In the rich and diverse socio-cultural and economic settings of Nepal, there can be no 'one size fits all' approach to women's empowerment and gender equality. Rather, such approaches – based on universal principles – must be adapted to the needs, priorities and realities of the specific situation or group, and adapted to different contexts. Gender norms, attitudes and behaviours take on different forms and different weight depending on the context, and these need to be taken into consideration in both the choice of priorities to pursue and the design of programmes to pursue them. Decentralised development

processes and approaches should be followed, in line with national decentralisation policies and starting with a 'bottom-up' perspective. Moreover, such development approaches must be integrated and holistic. As one participant put it:

“The aim is not just to promote economic activities and empowerment but to effect social transformation. You cannot start from economic empowerment only, you have to do everything at the same time – education, protection, leadership skills-training. So it is important to take an integrated approach. Through community meetings you give space to get together, share feelings and ideas. You provide an environment to bring these out from the home and inner perspective.” (IDI, government official).

Continued expansion and strengthening of services and service provision in a range of areas must accompany such efforts.

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

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