Policy brief

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Adolescent girls' education and empowerment: midline findings from a mixed methods assessment of Room to Read's Girls' Empowerment Programme

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Introduction

Adolescents (10–19 years) account for 20% of Nepal's population (according to the 2021 census), and since 2010 have received increasing attention from government and non-governmental actors alike. The Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) longitudinal research study brings a gender focus to Nepal's development programming for adolescents. In partnership with the Room to Read programme, GAGE has been conducting a nested impact evaluation of the Girls' Education Programme (GEP), a multi-year education and empowerment programme implemented in Tanahun and Nuwakot districts. The programme supports adolescent girls from grades 6 to 12 through life-skills education, mentoring, educational support and community outreach.

This brief presents headline findings from the mixed-methods midline data collection undertaken in programming and non-programming research sites in 2023. The research explores adolescent capabilities across six domains (education, health, bodily integrity, psychosocial well-being, voice and agency, and economic empowerment) and considers the impact of the GEP programming in programming sites. The brief concludes by reflecting on the implications of these findings for future phases of the programme, as well as broader efforts to support Nepal's adolescent programmes, to achieve its commitments to the Sustainable Development Agenda 2030, and to harness the full potential of its youth population.

Methods

The midline study surveyed 672 adolescent girls (421 treatment, 251 control), 406 caregivers and 50 school focal persons. Attrition in the adolescent girls treatment group was approximately 26%, but given that baseline data had been collected five years earlier, this was not unexpected. The findings were analysed in SPSS-a quantitative data software. The survey findings were complemented by in-depth qualitative interviews with 260 adolescents, 120 parents and 10 key informants. Interviews were transcribed and translated into English, and then coded thematically in MAXQDA, a qualitative software package. Research ethics approvals were secured from ODI Global's and NISER's Research Ethics Committees.

Findings

Education

Despite early school enrolment norms, many girls, particularly in remote districts such as Nuwakot, began schooling late. GEP had a significant impact, notably in reducing absenteeism (overall decline of 26% for treatment group compared to 16% of the control group). The findings indicate that financial support and tutoring after grade 6 were essential to support girls' continued enrolment, and GEP improved girls' access to the school library as well as providing support for books and uniform costs. Parental support for girls' education increased markedly after daughters started attending GEP and reached higher classes. With participation in targeted legal rights sessions through GEP, the treatment group's legal awareness rose by 34% at midline from 10% at baseline, while it remained nearly constant at around 22% for the control group. However, some challenges (including household duties, socio-economic differences, disability, stigma related to menstrual hygiene management, and distance to schools) all negatively affected attendance.

In terms of impact pathways, the findings suggest that GEP improved girls' engagement and perceptions of education through mentoring, life-skills sessions, and material aid. However, gender norms continue to limit girls' participation in extracurricular activities, access to recreational spaces, and interaction with male peers.

Health

The findings show that before girls reach the age of menarche (approximately 13 years) they gained an overall understanding of menstrual hygiene through school and through GEP. The programme also increased coverage of menstrual hygiene support among participants by making the products available in the Room to Read rooms in schools. Whereas at baseline, 22% of the treatment group believed menstruation to be a disease, this fell to 4% by midline, though it remained at 8% for girls in the control group. Menstruation still stops 14% of girls in the treatment group and 24% of girls in the control group from attending school. Restrictions such as staying in separate rooms or dwellings, or avoiding contact with others during menstruation declined, although some restrictions persist (for example, girls are not allowed to enter sacred spaces when they are menstruating). Mothers also shared that when girls start menarche later than average, they tend to forget about MHM education they received in grade 6 through GEP and that refresher sessions could be useful.

The survey findings indicate that substance use was a concern at midline, with 20% of girls reporting alcohol use. Girls' resilience in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic was low, for treatment and control groups alike, reflecting vulnerabilities in coping with health-related challenges. Overall, access to health or nutritional support remained low, highlighting ongoing gaps in adolescent health services.

Bodily integrity

By midline, improvements were seen in girls' experiences with peer aggression and violence and there is no significant diference between control and treatment groups. Teasing remained the most common form of victimisation but was generally considered to be mild. Reports of teasing, physical violence, name-calling, and exclusion decreased in both the treatment and control groups, suggesting that these risks were decreasing with age (most girls reported never engaging in or being subjected to these behaviours). At baseline, most girls were aware of the legal age for marriage. Still, by midline, more girls believed in marrying later, aspiring to marry when aged 25–29 years. Findings also indicate a growing belief in marrying by choice. Most girls felt safe at school and in their community, although there was a slight decline in perceived safety. Qualitative data show that GEP's safety education boosted girls' confidence and awareness, leading to a greater sense of security among girls and relief among parents.

Psychosocial well-being

The midline survey suggests a decrease in participants feeling positive about their identity, interpersonal skills, and emotional control, yet an increase in positive feelings about the future, their capacity to recognise emotions, and setting goals. The qualitative study reveals notable differences between treatment and control groups. Girls in the treatment group, who participated in GEP, were more assertive, creative, collaborative and positive, and emphasised close ties with their GEP focal teachers. They actively engaged in group activities such as poetry, drawing and song-writing, and described the GEP space as safe and supportive. They felt comfortable reporting gender-based violence without fear, thanks to discreet intervention strategies by teachers. School principals confirmed these positive changes among the treatment cohort, citing increased proactiveness and joy among girls participating in GEP. These qualities were less evident among girls in the control group communities.

GEP has also positively influenced child–parent relationships. Parents in the treatment group have more positive views of their children on various fronts compared to control groups parents. However, the programme only has a few engagement sessions with parents.

Voice and agency

The findings indicate that patriarchal social norms still

limit girls' autonomy, with decisions often dominated by parents, community or school leaders. Nevertheless, most participants reported feeling comfortable expressing opinions to people close to them. Girls' freedom to migrate had improved by midline; however, overall mobility appeared to decrease, on account of conservative gender norms. Most participants did not engage with civic activities like youth clubs or groups, but by midline there was a small increase in participation compared to baseline. Mothers were the most trusted adult with whom adolescent girls could share aspects of their daily life (aspirations, problems with peers, bullying).

At baseline, most participants used their mother's phone, whereas by midline most had their own phone (ownership was higher among control group girls). In terms of gender attitudes, at baseline, most girls (over 80%) strongly disagreed with the statement that girls should marry before 18; this had increased by 10% by midline, reaching over 90% for both groups. There were also significant changes in terms of attitudes towards specific gender roles (e.g. girls and women taking care of the family), with support for gender-segregated roles falling from two-thirds to one-third.

Economic empowerment

The findings indicate modest progress in adolescent girls' financial inclusion and employment, at least in part due to age. Although savings among girls declined slightly, informal savings increased. Access to job opportunities such as in as wage worker in small business improved, with more girls being approached for work and discussing these offers with family. Participation in paid work rose, especially in selling goods and services. Most girls receive wages in cash. A small proportion from both groups benefited from vocational training (primarily in computer skills and tailoring). Local employment programme such as in cash for work programme from government participation was minimal. Qualitative studies show that overall, GEP contributed to vocational exposure, and shifting career aspirations among adolescent girls, though significant efforts are still needed to support girls and young women to access economic empowerment opportunities.

Conclusions and reccomendations

Overall the midline findings indicate that there is a need for more programmes to support adolescents during the second decade of life, and to continue support as they navigate the complex transition to young adulthood. Our findings suggest that especially with regards to educational access, self-empowerment and voice and agency that the Girls Education Programme has had modest but positive

effects, and other adolescent programmes can learn from the GEP experience. However, there is also a need to extend the scope of the GEP, especially with regard to increasing the frequency of parent meetings in GEP (there are only a few per year currently), and engaging more actively around parent-children relationships in the programme.

General programming
- Extend support to boys to help them successfully navigate the transition to middle and older adolescence. Raise awareness about and enforce sanctions against teachers who are repeat offenders.
- Expand the scope of activities, and implement tailored programming that targets boys.
- Modify and extend support to girls during later adolescence and young adulthood, when they encounter more restrictive social norms around marriage, unequal access to skills and higher education, and unequal work and career opportunities.
- Increase the frequency of parent meetings to maximise positive changes in child–parent relationships.

Education and learning
- Provide community-based or school-based support (for example, extra classes) for children from households where adult members are not literate.
- Provide extra classes in key subjects (English, Maths, Science) for which parents have to pay for extra tuition from grade 6 onwards (particularly grades 8–12), to ease the financial burden on parents and provide a further incentive for adolescents to stay in school.
- Work to raise girls' ambitions for higher education and emphasise (among parents and children) its importance. Leverage digital technology to link girls with adolescents outside the country, and to increase their exposure to online courses, including courses their peers in more developed countries are taking. This exposure should also involve parents as they are the decision-makers for girls' higher education.
- Collaborate with prevailing norm change programmes to address normative barriers that impede girls from accessing higher education, and address girls' low levels of confidence to negotiate about their future.
- Provide information as well as educational and career counselling for girls in higher education (girls and their parents both requested this specific support).
- Leverage Room to Read's global connection to add virtual exchange, sharing and building knowledge on education, skills and career preparation between adolescents in different contexts, but also with relevant institutions abroad.
- Explore the reasons why some girls do not want to go to school in order to understand the reasons why, and mitigate these where possible, for example providing

financial support to cover uniform and other materials costs.

Health nutrition, and sexual and reproductive health

- Provide water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) programming in schools, and raise awareness (among parents, families and communities) to eliminate restrictions on girls' activities during menstruation. Develop and scale programming for boys and young men to foster alternative masculinities and encouraging males to become protectors, not harassers.
- Continue raising awareness about menstruation and MHM so that girls have accurate information.
- Extend GEP MHM curriculum content up to grade 8 so girls who reach menarche later than average can still access knowledge on MHM.
- Build girls' confidence to actively use public spaces, and promote girl-friendly and adolescent-friendly spaces. GEP's legal awareness and exposure component could be tailored to support girls to use public spaces and raise awareness of their rights to use such spaces.
- Increase awareness about the risks of substance use. Programming with adolescents should challenge cultural norms that promote children's consumption of alcohol. This could also extend to parents.

Bodily integrity and freedom from violence

- Implement programmes in the community and in schools to continue to raise awareness of the legal age of marriage.
- Work with girls to better understand what risks girls face, and work to mitigate those risks. Key informants also reported that Room to Read's model of addressing gender-based violence in school by including teachers in awareness sessions has been successful in bringing behavioural change. Such programming could be replicated to address gender-based violence in schools and make girls feel safer. Monitoring by the School Management Committee, anonymous reporting through Room to Read classes or through the School Management Committee's, and creating environment where girls can come together in groups to report gender-based violence could further enhance violence prevention and response.

Psychosocial well-being

There remains a significant amount of work to be done to improve girls' psychosocial well-being. In general, adolescent programming such as GEP should increase their focus on psychosocial well-being. Priorities include the following:

- Understand why more girls report feeling unhappy (or less happy), feeling under strain, or losing sleep over worry, and work to mitigate these.
- Raise awareness about available mental health services available in the area to the programme participants and how to access these, encouraging girls to use services when needed. Such programmes should also be provided for free. One option would be to utilise the Nepal government's One-Stop Crisis Management Centre programme, based at district hospitals, to hold regular information and service camps in schools to support girls to identify their mental health needs and access services. Room to Read could facilitate these linkages. Some teachers involved in GEP have undertaken their own initiatives to link girls with mental health services, and the programme could formalise these initiatives. Room to Read could expand activities to link girls experiencing emotional or mental health challenges with local mental health services (such as the One-Stop Crisis Management Centre or programmes implemented by non-governmental organisations).

Voice and agency

- Programming should increase adolescent girls' exposure to local government service centres (such as those providing social protection, women's empowerment, health services), and work with local government to encourage them to adopt the Child Friendly Local Governance policy (CFLG) framework to support adolescent girls' opportunities to excercise voice and agency in local governance and civic spaces. Scale up medical, legal and psychosocial survivor services, and address the stigma and shame around divorce.

Economic empowerment

- Expand vocational training offered through Room to Read and other programmes. Training courses should support girls to enter the labour market, focusing on areas such as languages, secretarial skills, public service preparation courses, preparation for English language proficiency tests, extension of computer literacy training, and digital courses relevant to jobs such as accounting and book-keeping.
- Programming should include support to connect secondary school-aged girls to employment opportunities, justifying parental investment in their daughters' education. Programmes should work with local, national and international job providers to link girls to apprenticeships and internships, as a route into employment.