

Final Report

Participatory Ethnography Research for Musahar Girls' Education



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Girls'
Education
Challenge



TETRA TECH
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Abbreviations

CBS	Central Bureau of Statistics
CBO	Community Based Organisation
FCDO	Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office
FGD	Focus Group Discussions
GEC	Girls Education Challenge
GESI	Gender Equity and Social Inclusion
IDI	In-Depth Interview
JWAS	Janaki Women’s Awareness Society
KIIs	Key Informant Interviews
MHM	Menstrual Health Hygiene Management
MNM	Marginalised No More Project
MOEST	Ministry of Education Science and Technology
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NIDR	National Institute for Development and Research
NNMA	Nepal National Musahar Association
PAR	Participatory Action Research
PEA	Political Economy Analysis
PEAR –MGE	Participatory Ethnography Action Research for Musahar Girl’s Education
SESP	School Education Sector Plan
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SIP	School Improvement Plan
SG	School-Going
SSDP	School Sector Development Plan
TV	Television

Executive Summary

Background

The Musahar community, belonging to the Dalit caste, is one of the most marginalised groups in Nepal. Almost all Musahar households (around 99%) are entirely landless. Therefore, Musahar families and community members are engaged as bonded labourers even though the Government of Nepal has initiated rehabilitation programmes for former bonded labourers. The education status of the Musahar community is very poor, and 93% of people cannot read and write. Amidst this context, this participatory ethnography research study has been conducted to explore the caste-centric structural obstacles to girls' education.

Research Questions

To explore the ground realities of the most marginalised girls in accessing education, the primary research question was:

- What are the caste-centric structural obstacles that affect access, attendance, and attainment in education for the Musahar¹ community girls in Nepal?

Objectives of the study

This study has three research objectives:

- To investigate the factors that affect access to school and services and supplies related to schooling for Musahar girls.
- To understand the interrelation and integration of obstacles that affect access to education for the most marginalised Musahar girls.
- To analyse policies, plans, and practices relevant to access to education for the most marginalised Musahar girls.

Study approach

The study uses a participatory research approach in which ethnography was used to guide the process. The participatory research was used to link research back to understand the interrelation and integration of structural obstacles for the schooling of Musahar girls, and the factors that affect access to education and associated services and supplies. 15 Musahar communities across five districts were selected and data collection took place for one and a half months (22 June to 07 August 2022), under the leadership of the National Institute for Development and Research (NIDR), where the Janaki Women's Awareness Society (JWAS) has managed the researchers at the local level.

¹ Musahars are a Tarai Dalit community, who are mostly living in the Southern part of Nepal on government land, working as waged labourers for their livelihood.

Table 1: Data collection

Research Site		Input		Method of Inquiry			
District	Community/ Settlement	Lead Researcher	Researcher	Observation	In-depth Interview	KII	FGD
Sunsari	3	2	10	10	15	9	9
Saptari	3	2	10	10	15	9	9
Siraha	3	2	10	10	15	9	9
Mahottari	3	2	10	10	15	9	9
Dhanusha	3	2	10	10	15	9	9
Total	15	10	50	50	75	45	45

Ten Lead Musahar Researchers and 50 Musahar Women Field Researchers were involved in conducting 50 participant observations and 75 in-depth interviews with Musahar girls and boys, 45 key informant interviews with Musahar leaders, local government/educational coordinators, and head teachers, and 45 focus group discussions (FGDs) with school-going girls, girls who had never been or had dropped out of school, boys, mothers, and fathers.

Participant observations were conducted with 60 Musahar girls: 15 had never been to school, 15 were out of school and 30 were school-going girls. In-depth interviews were conducted with 50 Musahar girls aged 15-18 years old who were selected for observation, as well as 10 additional school-going Musahar girls and 15 boys.

NVivo software was used to analyse the data. Data categorised using NVivo was further triangulated and systematically analysed by NIDR's research experts.

Key findings

Poverty and economic hardship of the community: Household-level poverty is the most common and major barrier for girls not enrolling in school and dropping out. Girls' education chances are reduced when household resources are limited due to low household income, girls' domestic workload, the high opportunity cost of educating girls, as well as the indirect costs of education. Furthermore, the physical structure of houses in Musahar communities are poor, as they are made of bamboo, mud, and thatch. They do not have basic facilities like toilets and clean drinking water, reflecting the extreme poverty that Musahars continue to be subjected to. Most have a single room in which all family members sleep and cook. Regardless of household context, most of the girls were interested in joining school and continuing their studies as they know that education is important for their future life.

Attitudes of parents: The influence of families was a critical factor behind girls either dropping out of school or never going. Parents were found not to be very supportive of girls' education as they preferred girls to primarily engage in income generating activities and prioritise household tasks to meet essential basic needs. They do not typically associate education with increased economic opportunities and therefore are not willing to prioritise it in the way that education implementers expect them to. In this regard, their

poor financial status pushes them to spend most of their time in labour work, which generates immediate value and meets their current survival needs. Therefore, parents want their daughters time to be invested in either taking care of siblings, livestock, and household chores such as cooking food, cleaning dishes and clothes, fetching water, etc. or labour work.

School-related factors: Schools play vital roles in ensuring continued access to education. The government of Nepal ensures compulsory and free education up to a basic level and free education at the secondary level as guaranteed by the constitution of Nepal. The distance of the school from the community, as well as unfavourable, discriminatory and in some cases abusive teacher behaviours creating dehumanising conditions for Musahar girls were seen as a major barrier. In addition, worse school environments for them (more mistreatment from peers resulting in bullying, slurs and isolation related to their caste) cause many to drop out and never return. Another factor at the school level was found to be the traditional teaching style with limited student-teacher interaction. This limited girls' learning and, in some cases, completely discouraged them from continuing their schooling as they lagged further and further behind in comparison to other students. Finally, poor school infrastructure, relating to classrooms, benches, tables, toilets, and drinking water also prevented girls' access and attendance in schools.

Negative effects of coping mechanisms to address economic hardships and structural barriers: The research acknowledged the significance of socio-cultural norms, however, after sufficient consideration, it seems such norms are shaped in response to structural circumstances or conditions (Aslam et al., 2020). In the context of Musahars, and Musahar girls in particular, the research found that extreme economic hardship caused and perpetuated by caste-based oppression, shapes their life decisions, guides their socio-cultural norms, and ultimately impacts on their attitudes and approaches to education. Early marriage, alcoholism leading to domestic violence, and differential attitudes towards boys' and girls' education all present themselves as consequences of limited economic opportunities, which keep the community entrapped in bonded labour and generational poverty.

Policies and practices for access to education: National, provincial, and local level policies, plans, programmes, and practices all play a crucial role in improving access to education for the most marginalised girls. However, except for some national level provisions and commitments and a few provincial interventions such as *Beti Bachau and Beti Padhau* (Save Daughter and Teach Daughter) targeted toward girls and marginalised communities, municipal and school-level efforts have not been designed or implemented effectively. Enrolment campaigns and seasonal door-to-door activities were not found to be effective and meaningful enough to motivate marginalised girls into attending school and accessing education over a period of time.

Recommendations

The Ethnographic Participatory Research for Musahar Girls' Education concludes with 18 recommendations for development partners, federal/provincial/local governments, schools, community, and parents, which are as follows:

Development Partners

1. **Sustainable support to the community to emphasise the importance of education:** There is a need for long-term advocacy in the community to highlight girls' education issues to ensure changes are sustainable.
2. **Post research and intervention support:** Research organisations must continue to support Musahar communities, especially empowering Musahar girls to continue their research.
3. **Sustainable livelihood support intervention:** Interventions and initiatives must be undertaken to provide livelihood and income generation activities for Musahar communities.
4. **Schooling programmes:** There needs to be schooling programmes that specifically target Musahar girls and their concerns. This could include hostel-based schools that provide a safe and dedicated learning space.
5. **Skills-based training:** Young girls and boys who are educated up to a basic level (Grade 8) must be provided skills-based training which could help them to earn income.
6. **Physical and infrastructural support to schools:** The infrastructure of classrooms must be improved to provide a safe and sufficient learning environment for students.
7. **Political and Economic Analysis (PEA):** More political and economic analyses of the Musahar community must be carried out by researchers to contribute to the broader understanding of how the political economy of caste in Nepal continues to impoverish the Musahar community and inhibit their children's access to education.

Federal and local government of Nepal

1. Carry out campaigns to ensure five vital registrations take place with certificates issued (birth, death, marriage, migration, and divorce);
2. Prioritise more investment in marginalised girls' education;
3. Formulate flexible and alternative schooling policies that take into account challenges of Musahar girls and address them effectively;
4. Rigorous supervision by local government to ensure education policies and programmes are effectively implemented by schools; and
5. Develop a five-year plan that provides vision for improving education for Musahar girls.

Schools

1. Better collaboration and coordination between different stakeholders such as teachers, parents, and local governments to improve access to education for Musahar girls;
2. Create school improvement plans which can help to provide an inclusive and conducive environment for Musahar girls; and
3. Improved school infrastructure by coordinating with local government.

Community and parents

1. Support to Musahar girls to enrol in school by changing attitudes towards girls;
2. Prepare meals and other school materials before going to school; and
3. Ensure girls have clean school uniforms before going to school.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

The Musahar community belongs to the Indo-Aryan ethnic group known as the lower Dalit ('untouchable') class in the Hindu caste hierarchy. Musahar are said to be among the poorest among the identified castes across India and Nepal. Traditionally, they were used to catch rats and are still associated with eating them. Literally, the term Musahar is composed of "musa" and "har" which means rat taker or rat eater. (Jha, 1998; Kumar, 2006). In India Musahar are found in the state of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and Jharkhand. Bihar has the maximum concentration (88.6%) of Musahars (Sahay, 2019). In Bihar the Musahar predominantly reside across Bhagalpur, Monghyr, Purnea, Gaya, Muzaffarpur, Darbhanga, Saran, Champaran and Bhojpur districts.

In Nepal, the Musahar are found in Terai (living in Eastern and Mid-Terai and Western Terai) and are scattered across Morang, Saptari, Siraha, Dhanusha, Mahottari, Sarlahi, Rautahat, Nawalparasi, Rupandehi, Kapilbastu, Banke and Bardia districts. As per CBS (2011), the total population of Musahar is 234490 (0.88%) out of 13% Dalit in the total population. The Musahar are one of the most marginalised populations in Nepal. Centuries of caste² segregation and continued structural suppression result in the community ranking 97 out of 97 on the Nepal Multidimensional Index (NSII, 2014). This community belongs to the Dalit caste in Nepal, who are considered to be 'untouchables' within the Hindu caste system. Both their cultural tradition and language is known as Maithali.

Musahars are disadvantaged by virtue of being Dalit 'untouchables'. They are a highly marginalised, excluded group, very poor and landless (Chaudhry, 2008). They suffer from social exclusion, economic deprivation, and political underrepresentation. Mainly, Musahars are agrarian labourers and maidservants, earning daily wages as the means of their livelihood. Nowadays, they are also found to be working in road construction, cleaning, and occasionally within private and public organisations. Some members of the community access steep loans from local lenders in order to travel to regions such as the Middle East in search of better work and means to earn. As with other Dalit castes, a number of unique challenges affect the Musahar people. For example, they are compelled to live apart from other members of society and are unable to participate in cultural and religious functions with 'higher' classes. They are not allowed to marry 'upper-class' people. They are not permitted to collect water, eat, or enter the home of a higher caste person. In these ways, Musahar people are economically exploited while also being discriminated against by society, leading to severe poverty and poor socioeconomic development.

The Musahar community are extremely poor – 99.4% of Musahars do not have any land holdings; most remain trapped in debt bondage, with generations of Musahars being trapped in bonded labour that persists despite its criminalisation in 2002 (CBS, 2011; Giri, 2012; UNFCO, 2013). Though the Government of Nepal initiated rehabilitation

² The caste system was the traditional system of social stratification of Nepal. The caste system defines social classes by a number of hierarchical endogamous groups often termed *jaat*. Historically, the caste system justified the subjugation of lower castes, allowing upper-caste Nepalis to use their status to gain security and power. This system oppresses lower-caste communities and gives power to upper-castes.

programmes for former bonded labourers, studies show that a blanket ban on bonded labour has failed to find less exploitative alternatives (Giri, 2012). To this day, there is no meaningful representation and Musahars' social status remains unchanged (Poudel, 2019).

For centuries, upper-castes controlled and subjugated communities: to evict them from their land, exploit them for labour, and enslave them (Tuhiwai-Smith, 2012). Musahar girls have borne the brunt of caste, class, and gender discrimination. Only 6% of Musahar girls are enrolled in education (Street Child, 2021). A case study by Poudel and Kattel (2019) found there has been no significant change in access to sources of drinking water and energy used for cooking in the last 15 years. The study further states that the educational condition of the Musahar community is very poor as 93% of people cannot read and write; resulting in marginalisation that spans all social, economic, political, and environmental dimensions.

The rationale behind this study is that participatory research aims to advance initial research; Meet the Musahars.³ The Musahar perspective (the principal viewpoint within which this research was proposed) perceives research as having a history that still offends the deepest sense of our humanity (Tuhiwai-Smith, 2012). Musahars encounter research as an extractive and exploitative experience. Therefore, this research study has been conducted as a participatory project that relies on the lived realities of some of the most marginalised girls and explores their resilience concerning education. The National Institute for Development and Research (NIDR) and Janaki Women's Awareness Society (JWAS) worked with Musahar leadership, represented by Nepal National Musahar Association (NNMA), to conceptualise and implement this research project.

In identifying gaps in the current evidence base on structural barriers to girls' education, especially for contexts where cost barriers cannot be minimised or eliminated (GEC Research Feasibility Report, 2020), this research aimed to (i) gather relevant data providing a deeper understanding of the limitations imposed by structural and systemic caste-centred barriers to education for most marginalised Musahar girls, and how such barriers have been further intensified by COVID-19 (with implications for other emergencies); and (ii) generate evidence-led policy recommendations for improving access to education for the most marginalised girls at a regional and national level.

1.2 Research questions

This research responds to the question:

What are the caste-centric structural obstacles that affect access, attendance, and attainment in education for the most marginalised girls in Nepal?

³ The research conducted by Street Child and Janaki Women's Awareness Society (JWAS) underpinned the Girls' Education Challenge project: Marginalised No More. The programme worked with 7,500 out-of-school Musahar girls, aged 10 to 18 in the Mahottari, Dhanusha, Siraha, Saptari, and Sunsari districts of Province 2. From 8% in 2016, 54% of the girls on the programme in 2020 were able to read and write. (Street Child, 2021). This programme provides powerful proof of what is possible when communities are asked what they want. 'Meet the Musahars' was instrumental in their relationship with the implementers and the implementer's responsiveness to issues along the road to these results.

https://girlseducationchallenge.org/media/iz3aodmf/mnm-street-child-nepal-endline-report_cohort-ii-final.pdf

https://girlseducationchallenge.org/media/m2wp5qbx/14-7-2022_clean-version_mnm_endevaluation_cohort1-final-draft.pdf

https://girlseducationchallenge.org/media/ijqjrtul/marginalised-no-more_street-child-nepal_gec-endline-evaluation_cohort-3-final.pdf

This question was applied to policies, plans, and practices at the school and the system levels to locate the origins of oppressive caste practices and propose responsive, restorative interventions rooted in the lived realities of most marginalised girls. The lead researchers co-created and confirmed specific sub questions with the Musahar researchers, who joined the research team following the inception phase.

1.3 Objectives of the study

- To determine factors that affect access to school and services and supplies related to schooling for Musahar girls;
- To understand the interrelation and integration of structural obstacles that affect access to education for Musahar girls; and
- To analyse policies, plans, and practices relevant to access to education for the Musahar girls.

2. Study approach

A critical ethnographic approach was chosen to ascertain the structural circumstances and conditions that underscore the Musahar community. A critical ethnography approach surfaces the invisible structures that sustain social inequalities and inequities to call for social transformation (Crotty, 1998:12).

Ethnography was used to guide the research process and participatory research was used to link research back to understand the interrelation and integration of structural obstacles and the factors that affect access to education and associated services and supplies for the schooling of Musahar girls.

2.1 Study design

Ethnographic participatory research was used as the primary research method; employing ten Lead Musahar Researchers⁴ (three female and seven male) and 50 Musahar women field researchers⁵ to observe and interact with participants in their daily environment to capture their lived realities. Through this combination of participant observation (i.e., the central mode of ethnography), in-depth interviews with girls and boys, focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews (KIIs), data was collected that presents a more holistic and nuanced picture of Musahar girls' access to education.

2.2 Situational analysis

Before selection of the settlements and the field study, a situation analysis was conducted in the Musahar community between 14 and 17 December 2021. The research team carried out extensive consultations with ten Musahar leaders and community members, with the aim of outlining the research scope, priorities, and introductory activities. The consultations were facilitated by NIDR and partner organisation JWAS in the Madesh

⁴ Lead Musahar Researchers had intermediate and above qualifications and at least two years of working experience. They were social workers/mobilisers of MnM project.

⁵ Musahar women researchers had completed school leaving certificates. Most of them did not have any previous working experience in research and data collection. The Musahar Women researchers were not engaged in GEC project, but 10 Lead Researchers have some experience working with GEC project implemented by Street Child of Nepal and about 10 research Participants also had engagement with GEC project. Added in report

province of Nepal (Province 2). There was a key focus on the recruitment of Musahar Research Leads and Researchers, which was critical in convening a strong research team. Musahar leaders confirmed that they remained supportive of the overall research and would assist in hiring suitable candidates for the research workforce. As Musahar women and girls (primarily) were involved in the project as paid researchers who gained employable skills, the leaders expressed that the research itself was an intervention for the community, even in its initial stages. As this research study builds upon previous work in these communities, including community mobilisation with men and boys, there were no notable objections from men and boys. The community representatives reiterated the need for this participatory research and highlighted some persistent issues currently experienced by their communities that this research should look to address:

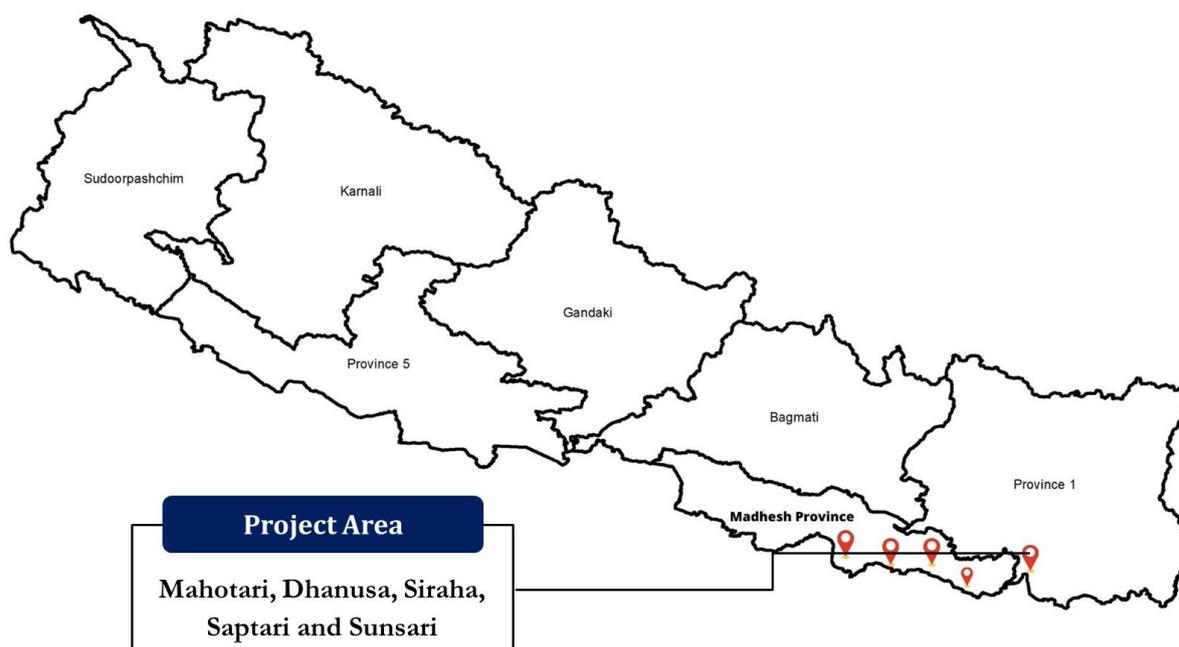
- The majority of children who are of school-going age do not attend school (95 of 100 as per their estimation) and those enrolled in schools do not regularly attend; despite schools being very close to their settlements;
- Children are deprived of daily nutritious meals;
- Water and sanitation remain a key challenge for the communities, with most communities suffering from an absence of toilets;
- There is a severe lack of employment/economic opportunities, reinforcing practices of bonded labour;
- Congested living spaces (there are many cases of five to ten family members living in a single room);
- Child/early marriage is widely prevalent and has increased during COVID-19; a lack of information around family planning and menstrual hygiene management was also noted, although there was no evidence to suggest that this in particular would inhibit participation in the research;
- Numerous challenges related to discrimination and economic deprivation remain as main reasons for alcoholism among Musahar men, which then causes protection risks for mainly girls and women; and
- Short life expectancy amongst Musahars; many members within their communities do not live beyond the age of 60.

2.3 Study setting, site selection, and sampling frame

The study was conducted in 15 communities/settlements of Dhanusha, Mahottari, Saptari, Siraha, and Sunsari districts⁶ of Nepal, representing urban, semi-urban, and rural localities of the Madesh province of Nepal (Province 2). The study sites were selected on the basis of the principle that ethnographic research needs to be rigorous and have a high level of researcher engagement.

⁶ Rationale of selection of five districts: In Nepal most of the Musahar community live in the Terai area. We selected the five Terai districts (Sunsari; Saptari; Siraha; Dhanusha; and Mahottari district) because the majority of Musahar were found there.

Figure 1: Project area map



The consultation meeting with Musahar Leaders at the outset helped to understand and analyse the current scenario in Mahottari, Dhanusha, Siraha, Saptari, and Sunsari districts that informed the selection of the settlements and samples of girls. The consultation meeting coupled with criteria (overall literacy rate, geographic marginalisation, and impact of COVID-19) that consider access and accessibility constraints, as well as representation of rural and urban contexts and voices. The inclusion of these criteria has allowed for an analysis of how structural factors are differentiated or distinct across these spatial configurations. Upon selection, researchers conducted initial rounds of comprehensive consultation with critical stakeholders such as local leaders, schoolteachers, representatives of local government and community-based organisations, including representatives from the National Nepal Musahar Association (NNMA). This has covered both the communities and the sample catchment areas (urban, sub-urban and rural) of these communities, to contextualise and substantiate our understanding of structural factors influencing girls' education.

2.3.1 Sampling frame

This study aims to explore the underlying issues and experiences of Musahar girls to understand the barriers that deter them from formal education. Creswell (2002) suggests including one cultural-sharing group in ethnography. Morse (1994) suggests three to five focus group discussions (FGDs) with at least six participants and 30-50 interviews and/or observations for ethnographic study. Sample size selection is not only the selection of the number of participants, but it is a process that incorporates the number of participants, their level of engagement, and length of engagement during the research.

In this study, keeping in mind the depth of ethnographic analysis, representativeness of findings, effective supervision, and robust monitoring for quality control, the following sample size was determined:

Table 2: Study sample size

Methods	Study Participants	Criteria	Number	Total Sample Size
Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)	Never Been to School or Drop-out Girls	1 FGD in each district	5	30-50 (6-10 informants per FGD)
	School-Going Girls		5	30-50 (6-10 informants per FGD)
	Boys		5	30-50 (6-10 informants per FGD)
	Fathers		5	30-50 (6-10 informants per FGD)
	Mothers		5	30-50 (6-10 informants per FGD)
	Total		25	150-250
Key Informants Interviews (KIIs)	KIIs with Head Teachers	1 KII per Settlement	15	15
	KIIs with Local Government representatives	1 KII per Settlement	15	15
	Community Leader	1 KII per Settlement	15	15
	Total		45	45
In-Depth Interviews with girls and boys	School-Going Girls	2 participants per settlement	30	30
	Never Been or Drop-out Girls		30	30
	Boys	1 participant per settlement	15	15
	Total		75	75
Participants Observation	Never Been to School or Drop-out Girls	2 girls per settlement	30	30
	School-Going Girls	2 girls per settlement	30	30
	Total		60	60

Likewise, 15 communities across five districts have been selected on the basis of geographic locations in urban, semi-urban, and rural as well as catchment areas of the Marginalised No More project.⁷ The list of 15 communities is as follows:

Table 3: Selected locations

S.N.	District	Rural/ Municipality	Settlement	Type of Settlement
1	Mahottari	Bhangaha	Sitapur	Semi Urban
2	Mahottari	Gaushala	Brahamsthan	Rural
3	Mahottari	Loharpatti	Dathaura	Semi Urban
4	Dhanusha	Aurahi	Purandahiya	Rural
5	Dhanusha	Janakpurdham	Lohana	Urban
6	Dhanusha	Hanspur	Parsahi	Semi Urban
7	Siraha	Mirchaiya	Malahaniya	Urban
8	Siraha	Dhangadhi NP	Simaltoki	Semi Urban

⁷ The Marginalised No More project was carried out in the districts of Sunsari, Saptari, Siraha, Mahottari, and Dhanusha in the Koshi and Madhesh Provinces. The project aided 7500 Musahar girls who had never been or dropped out of school. 60% of them transited to go to formal school, while the remaining 40% transited to go to a livelihood support intervention. Only 14 MnM project girls (6 school-going, 5 drop-out, and 3 never-been-to-school) out of 60 girls participated in this study.

S.N.	District	Rural/ Municipality	Settlement	Type of Settlement
9	Siraha	Lahan NP	Shobhapur	Urban
10	Saptari	Surunga	Bhusimahuliya	Semi Urban
11	Saptari	Tirhut GP	Dhanpuri	Rural
12	Saptari	Khadak	Duhabi	Semi Urban
13	Sunsari	Inarwa	Kanun Tole	Urban
14	Sunsari	Inarwa	Hanuman Tole	Semi Urban
15	Sunsari	Duhabi NP	Pharsahi	Urban

The participation of 15 communities across five districts for an ethnographic study might be assumed to be a relatively high number. However, there are two clear rationales for this decision. Firstly, although Musahars may be a homogenous group caste-wise, girls' and their families' life experiences that shape their educational experiences might differ across geographic spaces and settlements as they are subject to external factors such as disaster risks, political unrest, and local governance. Secondly, Musahars are also scattered and usually live on the peripheries of non-Musahar settlements across different districts, therefore, a comprehensive analysis of their lived experiences, eventually informing policy recommendations for Musahars, requires representation from lesser populated groups as well as more populous ones. As a result, this study has selected four districts from Madhesh Province and one district from Koshi. These five districts are selected because they have highest Musahar population concentration as compared to other districts (NSII, 2019).

2.4 Method and tools of the data collection

To explore the research question, four ethnographic research methods and tools were used:

- Participant observation;
- In-depth interviews with girls and boys;
- Key informant interview; and
- Focus group discussion.

The proposed methods were followed by observing participants for a set duration of time, conducting interviews with selected participants and informants, and organising different focus group discussions for target groups for research in the varying schools and communities. Such activities and efforts ensured sufficient data for a rigorous and robust analysis. Musahar women researchers that conducted interviews were fluent in Maithali but less competent in Nepali language. Lead researchers had good fluency in both languages. Final notes were prepared in Nepali which were translated by NIDR professional staff into English for analysis.

i. Participant observation

Participant observations were conducted with 60 Musahar girls; 15 had never been to school, 15 were out of school and 30 were school-going girls.

ii. In-depth interviews with girls and boys

In-depth interviews are one of the important components of this study. Interviews were conducted with 50 Musahar girls aged 15-18 years old who were selected for observation, as well as ten additional school-going Musahar girls and 15 boys. The in-depth interview guide was used to conduct all in-depth interviews.

iii. Focus group discussion

A total of 25 focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with five school-going girls, five never been/drop-out girls, five boys, five mothers, and five fathers. In the FGDs, participants discussed and reflected on their views on girls' education. It proved to be useful to draw meaningful inferences on the subject matter from the different opinions of participants.

iv. Key informant interview

A total of 45 key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted with head teachers, local government representatives, and community leaders. The KIIs helped to uncover and identify problems and the potential causes of issues faced by Musahar girls. The interviews helped to explore the school and system-level factors influencing girls' access to education.

2.4 Preliminary field visits

Prior to fieldwork, preliminary field visits were made before conducting training with Lead Musahar Researchers and Musahar Women Researchers in the study sites. The following activities were carried out:

- Meeting with Nepal National Musahar Association (NNMA) and key stakeholders;
- Observation of the community;
- Social mapping;
- Situation analysis; and
- Community visits and rapport building.

Meeting with the Nepal National Musahar Association (NNMA) and key stakeholders: Initial visits to the study sites focused on deeper consultations with the NNMA, local government representatives, community leaders, parents and girls, and other stakeholders to share the study's objectives and gather any feedback. In the meeting with the NNMA, they provided a list of potential Musahar Women Researchers and Lead Researchers, and a commitment was secured to engage and invest time in the research.

Unstructured observation of the community: Unstructured observations of the communities were undertaken to understand the Musahar community prior to conducting the study, as a way of understanding the context of the study participants. The unstructured observations were carried out to conduct a situational analysis, and to develop research tools.

Community mapping: Following the completion of the settlement listing and social mapping, community mapping was conducted with the aim of accurately identifying working communities and households. As part of the social mapping, Musahar Women Researchers at JWAS, and Lead Researchers at NIDR, worked together to determine the total number of Musahar households within the identified settlements. This also included listing names of household heads. With the support of the Lead Researchers the Musahar Women Researchers captured the household information of interviewed girls about their household education, facilities like toilets, and water sources, and their livelihood, health, and disability.

Figure 2: Community mapping



These activities helped to create an understanding of the relevant organisation and identify potential challenges related to Musahar girls and their daily lives, and to identify existing infrastructure such as schools, community places, health and child clubs, shops, and shared public spaces. These actions also supported an increase in the interpersonal relations between the communities and our research team members.

Rapport building: Prior to initiating the study, the female Musahar Field Researchers and Lead Musahar Researchers contacted relevant government officials at the local government office to seek their support for the study. At the central level, the Team Leader and lead data analyst contacted and coordinated with the Ministry of Education Science and Technology (MOEST) to conduct the study. The female field researchers and lead researchers also contacted and spoke with relevant local individuals and agencies to gain support in navigating the community and establishing rapport with local residents.

The Musahar Women Field Researchers met with the parents of the selected Musahar girls to explain the scope of the activities and take written informed consent from parents to conduct research with the girls. After receiving informed consent from the parents, the

researchers also met with the selected Musahar girls and explained the purpose of the study and obtained written informed consent from the girls themselves.

Figure 3: Rapport building with school head teacher



2.5 Lead Researchers and Musahar Women Field Researchers

There were ten Lead Musahar Researchers and 50 Musahar Women Field Researchers⁸ who had relevant experience in community-level fieldwork and were familiar with the community. Their skill level was assessed by JWAS through interviews to ensure that the researchers could conduct the participatory observations and in-depth interviews, FGDs and KIIs. They were fluent in both languages, Maithali and Nepali.

Before training commenced, NIDR assigned the Musahar Women Field Researchers and Lead Researchers to their agreed roles and provided training on codes of conduct for data collection.

⁸ The education of Musahar Women Researchers was Grade 10 passed or above and Leader Researchers was Grade 12 passed or above. The Musahar Women researchers were not engaged in GEC project, but 10 Lead Researchers had some experience working with GEC project implemented by Street Child of Nepal. About 10 research Participants also had engagement with GEC project.

Figure 4: Training of women field researchers



The intensive, practical-based researcher training was conducted in two phases. In the first phase, Lead Researchers were trained, which the NIDR facilitated from 29 May to 02 June 2022 in Bardibas, Mahottari district. In the second phase, the female Musahar field researchers were trained. This was facilitated by the NIDR core team, lead researchers, and JWAS from 18 to 22 June 2022 in Janakpur, Danusha district. Intensive, and practical-based, researcher training was conducted in both phases of training sessions. Training sessions covered the objectives of the qualitative component of the study, child protection and safeguarding policies, and qualitative research practices. It also included an overview and practice of each observation, in-depth interview, focus group discussion (FGD), and key informant interview (KII) tools.

Similarly, one-day piloting was also conducted in a community of Mithila Municipality with ten Musahar girls in the first phase of the study, and in Nabrain Tole and Jatahi Tole of Nabrain Municipality with 50 Musahar girls to finalise the tools.

After the training, a community session was conducted to orient the community regarding the aims and aspirations of the research. The Musahar Women Field Researchers and Lead Researchers led this session with support from the NIDR and the NNMA to alleviate concerns and address any potential conflicts.

Figure 5: Training of Lead Researchers



2.6 Data collection process and analysis

Ethnographic participatory research is an iterative process in which field data is collected and organised systematically. NVivo software was used to organise the data systematically and data analysis was conducted manually by using robust techniques.

Data collection was conducted in two stages. The first stage took place in the first 15 days, participant observation was conducted in three to four phases, then themes were identified for in-depth interviews (IDI), KIIs, and FGDs. The Data Analyst Assistants and Lead Researchers reviewed all the field notes and revised the developed guidelines of IDI, KIIs, and FGDs in support of the Lead Data Analyst and Team Leader. Secondly, IDIs, FGDs, and KIIs were conducted to find out the gaps identified from these observations. The following steps were considered for data collection and analysis:

Step 1: Participant observation

In the first stage, the following activities were conducted:

- **Participant observation:** The Musahar Women Researchers conducted three to five days of participant observation with the support of Lead Researchers through an emic perspective⁹. The female Musahar researchers took detailed field notes with full transcriptions, including dates and times of all observations every day. Then, they

⁹ The emic perspective is the insider's perspective, the perspective that comes from within the culture where the research is conducted.

sent their field notes to Lead Researchers for feedback. The Lead Researchers provided feedback to the Musahar Women Researchers to identify any gaps. To strengthen the information and its validity, dates and times were included in the field notes. Finally, the Lead Researchers sent the transcripts to data analysts for more feedback.

- Simultaneously, the Team Leaders, Lead Data Analysts and Data Analyst Assistants designed IDIs, KIIs and FGDs guidelines by using a grounded theory approach.¹⁰

Step 2: Organise field notes

Lead Musahar Researchers finalised their field notes and sent them to the respective Data Analyst Assistant of each district. The Data Analysts organised the field notes on paper and on computers systematically by date and place. Then reviewed the respective district field notes and sent feedback to the Lead Researchers to identify if any further information was needed. The same process occurred for the IDIs, KIIs, and FGDs.

Step 3: Participatory data analysis

In this stage, an inductive approach was applied to develop the coding process. The common themes, ideas, issues, or questions that emerged across research methods were identified; and similarities and dissimilarities were grouped accordingly. Team Leaders, Lead Data Analysts, and Data Analysts reviewed all the translated notes, to identify interesting and significant emerging issues.

The team developed major themes/coding (ideas and interpretations) using a participatory approach (the Musahar community leaders and researchers' team of each district participated in developing codes and in the data analysis process). They created charts of different themes for the Musahar Women Researchers and Lead Researchers to discuss, and then collected feedback from community members (never-been to school, drop-out and school-going girls as well as their parents) to make the research as participatory and as representative as possible.

Step 4: Conducting in-depth interviews

In-depth interviews (IDIs) with participants who were observed during the participant observations were conducted using interview guidelines to understand various factors related to the research questions and how they intersect.

Step 5: Conducting focus group discussions and key-informant interviews

At this stage, the team collected information at the demand side (community level) and system level/supply side (school and local governments). The focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted to get community-level information from parents and their daughters. The key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted to collect information and perspectives of the supply sides (school head teachers and education officials/representatives of local government) and community leaders' perspectives.

¹⁰ Grounded theory (GT) is concerned with the generation of theory, which is 'grounded' in data that has been systematically collected and analysed and used to uncover such things as social relationships and behaviours of groups.

The final field notes of FGDs and KIIs were analysed by the Team Leader, Lead Data Analyst, five Data Analysis Assistants, and Lead Researchers.

Step 6: Data analysis

The transcribed information of the observations, IDIs, KIIs, and FGDs were analysed through a participatory approach, engaging Musahar Leaders, NIDR/JWAS team, Lead Researchers, and Musahar Women Field Researchers:

- An inductive approach was applied to develop codes/nodes.
- Quotes were found to illustrate and pay equal attention to similarity and contradictory views.
- These issues were categorised by district and rural/ municipalities levels, and finally integrated into the relevant sections.
- The different conceptual categories and patterns were summarised and analysed.
- Relevant information was placed under these conceptual categories.

Finally, NVivo 12 software was used for coding and analysing the stories, texts and data to identify patterns and draw findings from the KIIs, IDIs and FGDs.

2.7 Duration of the study

The study had an overall duration of one year and three months, beginning on 01 October 2021, and ending in December 2022. The Musahar Women Field Researchers and Lead Researchers were mobilised for data gathering in the field for a period of one and a half months; from 22 June to 07 August 2022. The overall timeline of the study is given below:

Table 4: Study timelines

Research Site	Input
Agreement between Tetra Tech and NIDR	September 29, 2021
Inception Report submission	February 2022
Training and Orientation to Lead Researchers	May 20-23, 2022
Training and Orientation to Musahar Women Researchers	June 16-19, 2022
Field Data collection	June- July 2022
Draft Report Submission	October 2022
Final Report Submission	May 2023

2.8 Limitations of the Study

The study had several limitations as follows:

- The education level of Musahar Women Researchers was low (mainly at the secondary level) and were not well experienced. This meant extra time was required to capture specific information for the study and writing field reports as their mother tongue is Maithili.
- It was a challenge to find girls in their houses to interview because they were mostly either on farms or working on the riverbank to collect sand earn money. Musahar Women Researchers visited them frequently and went repeatedly to interview them.

- As some of the Musahar Women Researchers were from the same community as the participants there was a bias in writing the field notes.
- During the research many of the respondents felt shy giving answers. Therefore, their responses may not have fully captured their experiences. To address this challenge, our researchers visited the girls several times.

3. Findings

In this section, the profile and attitudes of Musahar girls towards their education are discussed in detail. Attitudes of their primary caregivers and the wider community towards girls' education are explored in addition to factors that affect access to schools and services, economic hardship, and structural and social-cultural practice emerging from the research.

3.1 Profile of the Musahar girls

3.1.1 Socio-cultural characteristics

Figure 6: Musahar community household structure



All the girls and their parents have strong faith in the Hindu religion and speak Maithali language. The Musahars are a Tarai Dalit community living in the southern part of Nepal. They believe in the gods '*Dina and Bhadri*' and worshipping them is a central part of their faith. They typically live in agglomerated settlements. Most houses in Musahar communities are made from bamboo, mud, and thatch and they do not have toilet facilities, instead using plots, roads, and the forest for defecation. They do have space for constructing toilets. A field observation found that the majority of Musahars have a single room where all family members sleep and cook. Some families have one or two goats. In the summer season, they sleep outside but are susceptible to snake and mosquito bites. Due to poor condition of houses, some leak during the rainy season.

Almost all households rely on hand pouring/ hand boring as their only source of drinking water, washing dishes, clothes and for other purposes, whilst a small number of households are able to access drinking water from a tap.

Most of the observed households did not have appropriate toilet and latrine facilities. Despite claims of the local and federal government that Nepal is an open defecation free country, most Musahars resorted to open defecation in the river basin near the community, forests, and roads. This has significant implications for communities living in the vicinity and particularly downstream.

“We go for the toilet in the nursery near the Balan River early in the morning. It takes 15-20 minutes from our community, and we go there at night and early morning. There are 48 houses in our community and only 8 houses have a toilet.” (FGD with girls, Surunga Saptari, and Kanun Tole, Sunsari)

“In our school, the drinking water facility is good, but the toilet is not properly managed. Also, there is no separate toilet for girls and there are no other facilities like dustbins in the toilets. The toilet is very dirty and has a bad smell, therefore, it is difficult to use. Additionally, running water is not available in the toilet. We must carry water buckets from the hand pump to the toilet, which makes us shy”. –School-going-girl, Sunsari, and Mahottari

3.1.2 Household and family background

This study found that research participants had an average of seven family members in their households. However, family size ranged from a minimum of four to a maximum of sixteen members who live and eat together in a single dwelling. The main source of income of Musahar communities comes from daily labour work. The majority work for farmland landlords and get a wage of NRs. 300-400 per day (around US \$ 2.5-3.5 per day). Earnings are mostly received and spent on the same day.

It was also found that some Musahar were engaged as bonded labourers.¹¹ Undertaking bonded labour is still prevalent in the Musahar community, which experiences deep-rooted poverty, unable to afford adequate food, clothes, or shelter. Therefore, they work for their landlords, who are rich, but they do not get sufficient money in return for their work. Instead, the landlords usually give them 10 kg rice or NRs 300 (US \$ 2.5) for a day's work. The money or rice they earn is not enough to sustain them. Musahar also travel to India for seasonal employment (as they do not need any citizenship or passport to do this).

This study found that parents of the girls had not completed primary education. Most parents work on farms for daily wages and give lower priority to education and higher priority to income-generating activities because they are landless, residing on

¹¹ A bonded labourer is someone who works in the fields for a landowner, looking after his animals and doing other agricultural work in the landlord's fields and in his household chores, and who is constantly taking or repaying loans from the landowner.

government land, and have no regular sources of income. The practice of sending children to school has now started among some families of the Musahar communities, but they still do not send their children to school regularly.

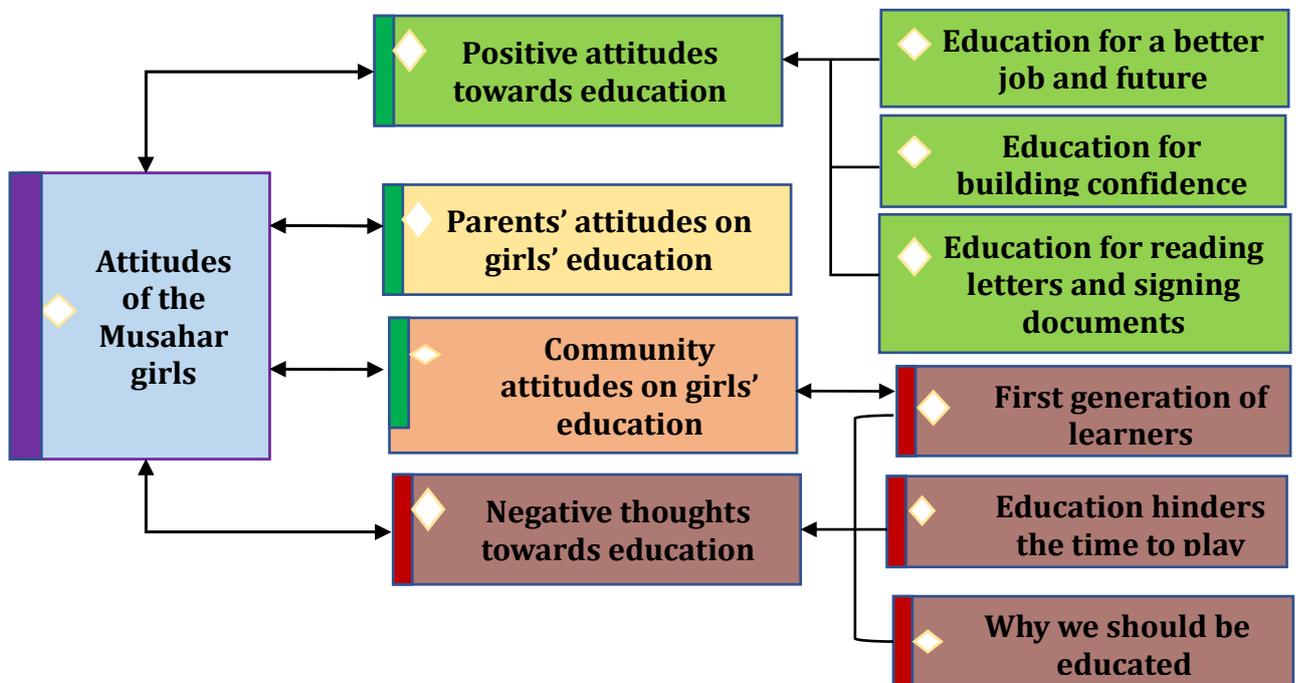
3.2 Attitudes of Musahar girls, their primary caregivers, and the community with regards to girls' education

This section is focused on the attitudes of Musahar girls, their primary caregivers, and the community and how they understand and what they think about girls' education.

3.2.1 Attitudes of Musahar girls

Notably, girls' experiences will largely depend on a blend of their various individual identities, and the prevailing attitudes within their families and community. Based on the categories of girls, two types of perspectives (positive and negative) towards education were identified in the study.

Figure 7: Attitudes of Musahar girls



3.2.1.1 Positive attitude towards education

Despite the lower priority given to education by parents, most girl participants in this study were identified as having a positive attitude towards education. They knew that education was essential for them and realised that due to illiteracy, the

“Girls have a better understanding regarding education than we used to, we think we will be independent after being educated.”

-Dhanusha, Never-been-to-school-girl

Musahar communities were not as socially progressed as other communities. The participating girls, who have never been to school, want to go to school given the opportunity because they have an aspirational outlook towards education and being educated. In analysing the positive attitude of the girls towards education, there is a lot of room for stakeholders/government to improve the current education status of the Musahar girls if stakeholders/government initiate needs-based interventions within the community. The stories of the participants related to positive attitudes towards education are categorised in the themes as below.

Education for better jobs and a better future: The study participants expressed that they would like to continue their education for better jobs and better futures. The school-going girls’ opinions showed that education is beneficial not only for the Musahar girls but also for girls from other communities. They understand that educated girls can distinguish between ‘good’ and ‘bad’. Educated girls can get good jobs, speak to others confidently and pay attention to their personal and professional development.

Discussions with school-going girls show that they have a clear understanding that without the requisite educational levels, a better job and improved lifestyle is not possible. Since Musahar girls and communities are not educated, they did not get opportunities for better jobs and were compelled to spend life doing labour in challenging conditions. Most of the school-going girls wanted to become

“After studying we can get a better job like being a teacher. We do not have to work in the fields as daily labourers. We do not have to depend on our family after marriage.”

-School-drop-out-girl, Dhanusha.

teachers and doctors in the future and wanted to contribute to Musahar communities. The endline report¹² of the Marginalised No More (MnM) Project of the Girls’ Education Challenge (GEC) also presents that the girls’ attitudes improved in comparison following the project intervention. The report claims that project interventions such as life skills and learning interventions supported this change towards the positive attitude of girls regarding education. The report also claims that the project was successful in helping girls to realise that education is necessary for better jobs and a better future. The school-going girls also demonstrated an understanding that education is similarly important for better business start-ups.

¹² https://girlseducationchallenge.org/media/iz3aodmf/mnm-street-child-nepal-endline-report_cohort-ii-final.pdf

On the other hand, school-going boys of Saptari and Dhanusha have a common understanding that the Musahar people have traditionally been labourers, thus they are deprived of getting an education, and the type of thinking that suggests they can only do labour work exists. They believe that one day, such thinking will be abolished and all of the Musahar people will be educated.

Education for building confidence: The understanding of participants of this study shows that education is the foundation for building confidence and gaining independence. Both girls and boys highlighted the importance of education in establishing their confidence and self-esteem. Participants shared that upon being educated, they could speak well, identify right and wrong, confidently share ideas like their teachers, speak confidently in front of people, ask for help from others, and debate with friends and other people.

While comparing the voices of the participants, the majority of school-going girls have a positive opinion about education, and they seemed to understand the importance of education for their personal and professional lives. Some girls, who have never been to school, want to go to school if they get the opportunity because they understand the implications of having a good education.

Education for reading letters and signing documents: The study found that the illiteracy of parents was also a motivating factor for girls' attitudes towards education. In the study, girls expressed that they had bad feelings about seeing the status of their parents who could neither sign a document nor were able to read letters family members and/or relatives sent to them. These experiences hurt the participating girls, and they wanted to go to school and be educated at least to be able to read letters and sign their names on documents rather than continuing with fingerprints like their parents. The girl participants also shared that if they get educated, at least they would be able to read the names of medicines and be aware of the expiry date. It is evident that these girls were eager to be literate, seeking opportunity to enrol and continue schooling.

“Our parents are uneducated, so they must apply a thumb/ finger stamp when signing documents because they cannot write their names. We do not want to do the same. We can write our signatures after being educated.”
–Girl who has never been to school, Dhanusha.

3.1.3.1 Negative thoughts towards education

Almost half of the drop-out girls and those who have never been to school, were found to harbour negative thoughts towards education. The stories of the participants related to negative opinions and attitudes towards education are categorised in the themes as below.

Education hinders the time to play and enjoy: This study found some negative opinions of girls towards education; instead of school, they were enjoying recreational activities. Girls said that they did not like to study but they like to play and pass time with neighbouring friends, while taking a break from labour work which they carry out with their parents to earn money. Since these girls are not interested in going to school but are interested in recreational and income-generating activities, there seems to be no effort to make them aware that such recreational activities are also available in schools, which could potentially motivate them. Interactions with boys in the Sunsari district found that, even though girls' names are registered in school, they do not go to school regularly. According to them, girls and their parents are inclined to focus more on earning money than securing an education, therefore there was not much focus on education either by the parents or by the children themselves.

"I am not interested in studying and want to do household work and enjoy recreational activities and gather with my friends".

- School-drop-out-girl, Siraha,

No perceived benefits of

pursuing education: This study found that the traditional understanding "girls are born to care for their family and siblings and to do household chores, education is not necessary for them" is still widely prevalent among parents and local people in the Musahar community. On the other hand, both girl and boy

"We didn't go to school, so we do not know the benefits of education."

- School-drop-out-girls, Siraha

"There was no benefit of education because many people in our community didn't get a job after completing their studies."

- Never-been-to-school-girl, Siraha

participants shared their frustrations regarding not getting jobs and having to do daily labour and agriculture-related work even though they are educated. There is a prevailing phenomenon which indicates that earning money is better for these groups than getting an education because their livelihood depends upon daily wage labour, without which they cannot survive. FGDs with girls in Siraha district concluded that due to a lack of value of education in their contexts, they do not send their daughters to school. The perspectives of the parents reiterate the notion that "no matter how much you study; you will end up working in the fields". Hence, parents focus on household chores and daily labour with them to earn money and address immediate economic needs for survival. As such, parents were found to discourage the girls to enrol in school and/or to continue in school, which further created a negative perception among girls regarding education.

3.2.3 Parents' attitudes towards girls' education

This study found that most of the parental attitudes towards girls' education were unfavourable/negative. This also turned out to be one of the most important reasons for

Musahar girls dropping out of school. This, furthermore, demonstrates that young Musahar girls faced oppression and marginalisation within their own households due to their subordinated identity of being a girl.

The study also found that almost all parents from the Musahar community have never been to school themselves. The parents who were not literate prioritised fulfilling their basic needs, like obtaining food and income, rather than focusing on girls' education.

During our discussions with community leaders, it was found that most parents from Musahar communities do not have an interest in girls' education due to their poor economic circumstances but do have a very positive attitude towards girls' engagement in income-generating activities and getting vocational training like selling tailoring, making *panipuri* (a deep-fried crisp flatbread, filled with a mixture of flavoured water), and running beauty parlours.

As such, they are looking to earn money quickly to fulfil current needs, whereas education cannot provide results immediately. Almost half of the school drop-out girls and girls who had never been to school, were found to harbour negative thoughts towards education and did not see its value in their lives. The accounts of parents' negative and/or positive opinions towards education are presented below.

First generation of learners: In the FGDs with parents of both school-going-girls and out-of-school girls, and KIIs with community leaders, most respondents expressed that the girls who enrolled in school were first-generation learners. They were the first in their families to go to school despite the fact that more than eight generations have been living in the same settlement. The initiatives found success because of government campaigns to enrol all children into school, support from International Non-Government Organisations (I/NGOs) and Community Based Organisation (CBOs), and local government initiatives to increase school attainment of the children.

In further discussions with them, huge challenges were identified in sending the girls to schools, which has been an intergenerational problem. In the past, there were no interventions to make communities aware of the importance of education. Instead, the focus was on daily labour and caring for livestock. The community had no land holdings to start agriculture-related income generating activities, which presented challenges to sending their girls to school.

Now however, the community shared their hope that those who have enrolled in school will improve their families' access to education for future generations, because they will be able to make education useful within their contexts.

“My elder brother and I were the first generation who has gone to school. Before that my father and grandfather and so on had not been to school.” – School-going-girl, Sunsari.

“In my family, no one is educated and none of them have enrolled in school to date. I am the first generation in my family, who is currently going to school.” –School-going-girl, Siraha.

Voices against educating girls: In discussions with parents, and based on interactions with girls, boys, and community leaders, it was found that parents are more interested in their daughters doing work in fields as employment or taking up a business. This is because the only livelihood option available to them was daily wage labour. Based on the FGDs with Musahar girls' fathers, it is understandable that some parents have narrow perspectives on a girls' education. They continue to believe that after marriage, girls must go to their husband's house, and as a result, parents do not support girls' education. One interesting finding

"In the Musahar community, girls are not allowed to study because it is their culture not to educate girls. So, parents are not supportive of giving this opportunity to their daughters."

*- KII with Local Government Representative,
Saptari*

that emerged was the Musahar community thought if girls are educated, they would elope or marry on their own within the same or other caste without thinking about family prestige. This was also found to be a constraint to girls' education.

Voices in favour of education: This study found that most of the current school-going girls' parents had positive views towards educating their girls. Most of them motivated their children to study and forced their children to regularly attend school. School-going girls also confirmed that their parents support them for their education and arranged the necessary education materials such as books, copies, pencils, school dress, and school tiffin (lunch).

"We motivate our daughters by saying that at least you can write your name and address if you go to school.

Sometimes, we give them 5-10 rupees to convince them to go to school."

-FGD with Parents, Mahottari District

In a FGD with school-going girls' mothers, this study found that mothers understood the importance of education as people from other communities were educated which led to better jobs. Many of them wanted their daughters to be educated and become teachers in future. However, these mothers also shared stories of how they did not receive proper support from their husbands to send their daughters to school.

According to the project's final report,¹³ parental attitudes improved as a result of the project. The report also claims to have carried out parent-focused interventions such as an awareness programme, the establishment of a learning centre in the Musahar community's settlement, and frequent home visits by community educators and social mobilisers in order to change parents' positive attitudes toward education.

¹³ https://girlseducationchallenge.org/media/m2wp5qbx/14-7-2022_clean-version_mnm_endevaluation_cohort1-final-draft.pdf
https://girlseducationchallenge.org/media/iz3aodmf/mnm-street-child-nepal-endline-report_cohort-ii-final.pdf
https://girlseducationchallenge.org/media/iqojrtul/marginalised-no-more_street-child-nepal_gec-endline-evaluation_cohort-3-final.pdf

3.2.3 Community and stakeholders' attitudes on girls' education

As mentioned throughout this report, the Musahar community is a poor Dalit community and thus, many community members do not see the value of education in the immediate term due to more pertinent survival needs.

This study had mixed findings regarding community attitudes towards Musahar girls' education. Some of the community still have the traditional thinking that a Musahar is

"Their lifestyles totally depend upon their daily labour on farms, construction work, brick factories, and other forms of dangerous work. They only think about how to fulfil their basic need such as food and shelter." – KII with Community Leader, Saptari

born to work in landlords' fields and carry out daily labour for survival. The study found that cultural norms dictate that girls should not be educated, and community attitudes are aligned to this. If educated, girls can elope at an early age and bring insult onto their parents within the community.

According to Municipal Education Coordinators of Saptari and Siraha districts, the educational status of the marginalised Musahar community is very poor. Around 95% of the Musahar are uneducated. In their opinion, parents do not know about the importance of education due to a lack of awareness, and only one percent of the community has passed the tenth grade. Some from the Musahar community send their daughters to school, but they drop out in grades five and six to start work.

Informally, discussions with the wider community found an external belief among upper-caste landlords and communities that if Musahars are

"Even though the Musahar girls are beautiful and intelligent, they are not born to be successful in their careers and they are only meant to do household chores and labour, because they are Musaharni (Musahar girl)"
- FGD with community members

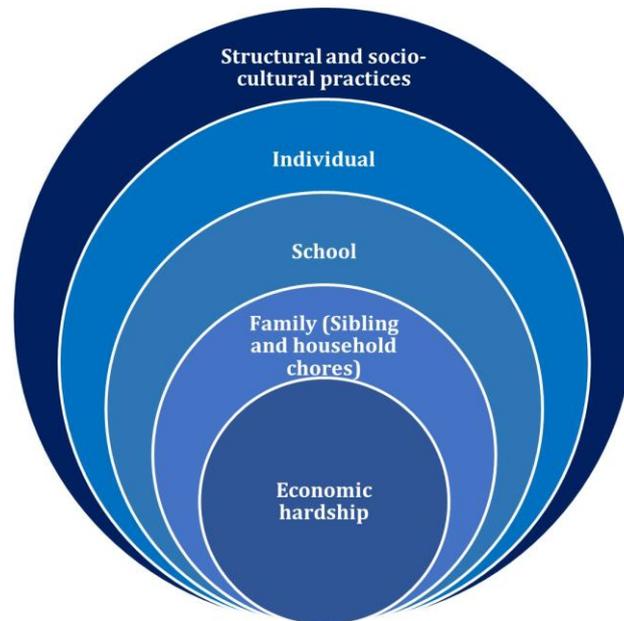
educated, then this would create a shortage of workers in the fields and in domestic work. This kind of external perspective was found to be one of the factors inhibiting Musahar girls' education.

However, there are a few positive avenues towards girls' education in the Musahar community. In a discussion, the community leader of Sunsari expressed the view that they are helping their daughters to study. They send daughters to school on time, and after coming back from school, they encourage them to read at home. In the community, favourable attitudes towards girls' education are being initiated in some ways. A few parents had a belief that an educated girl can educate her whole family.

3.3 Factors that affect access to school

This study found a number of structural barriers which affected girls' access to schooling. The factors presented by the stakeholders are categorised as economic hardship, family (sibling and household chores), school, individual, and structural and socio-cultural practices as shown in Figure 8:

Figure 8: Structural Barriers that Affect Musahar Girls' Access to School



3.3.1 Economic hardship

Economic hardship has been found to be a strong factor that affected girls' access to education. Within the broad component of economic hardship, poor economic conditions and their connection with daily labour, school expenses, and education as low priority are identified.

3.3.1.1 Poor economic condition of households

Poverty was found to be one of the most common reasons/barriers for never going to school and dropping out of school. The analysis of the data shows girls' chances of accessing an education are reduced if household income is low (less than \$1090 per year). It also increases the girls' workload at home and their labour.

If the Musahar community send their girls to school, they cannot make enough money to fulfil daily needs, education therefore represents a steep opportunity cost. They believe that marriage is the only solution left to secure a girl's future, in the absence of economic and other life opportunities.

Community members also shared their opinion that education provides no benefits to Musahars because many people in their community could not secure jobs even after completing their studies.

Since the Musahar are a landless community, they are mostly engaged in manual labour and have little interest in education. In early times, the Musahar used to work as 'Charuwa (herdsmen)', a term used to describe a range of bonded labour. They had to look after their landlords' fields, goats, and cows. Nowadays, this culture is slowly vanishing, but the working conditions are still the same. Musahars work for their landlords and are offered food, grains, meat, and alcohol in return. Even though the situation is slightly different now in terms of bonded labour, most of the girls who have never been to school and drop-out girls highlighted that they had to work on farms to earn money and fulfil the basic needs of their families.

Almost all educational coordinators and local government representatives reported that a key reason for the low literacy levels of girls was their parents, because they did not allow them to go to school regularly. They forced their children to earn money, to go to the forest to collect firewood, and to do household chores and fieldwork.

"Once or twice a year, at the time of festivals, we buy new clothes. When we request new clothes from our mother when ours become torn, she says that we don't have money to buy them and tells us to go to a tailor and sew the torn part and keep using them." - Girls who had never been to school, Saptari and Dhanusha

3.3.1.2 School materials

Many of the girls in the study were found to be using old, torn, and dirty clothes. The girls reported that they did not have enough clothes to wear and because of this many girls dropped out from school. Girls agreed that they had to drop out due to a scarcity of clean and tidy clothes and school uniforms to wear. They also reported that they used to get teased by other students for smelling bad and wearing old clothes to school. Participant observation confirmed that the girls were wearing poor and unhygienic clothes, which were torn.

School-going girls also articulated that they only had one set of the school dress that they continuously used through washing. As they did not have alternative clothes to wear whilst theirs were being washed, they had to remain absent whilst their clothes were drying.

School materials was another strong factor cited by the drop-out girls during FGDs and KIIs. Musahar girls reported that other community girls bullied them, and teachers humiliated them as their parents could not regularly afford school materials. The cost of schooling is one of the fundamental causes for the drop out of Musahar children. Although the Government of Nepal provides free education, indirect costs such as uniforms, education materials, transportation, and exam fees must still be covered by parents.

3.3.2 Family factors

The influence of family was another key reason that affected girls' access to education and schooling. The study found that parents are not aware of their children's education because they are busy doing daily work to fulfil basic and more urgent needs. Parents wanted to engage their children in doing household chores and taking care of siblings and livestock.

"I want to go to school when I see my friends going to school, but my mother does not allow me to go to school because she says I must look after my siblings and do household chores."
–One of the girls who had never been to school, Mahottari

"I wanted to learn but my parents never told me to go to school. I would like to go to school rather than do household chores. My parents want me to work on the farm and look after the animals in the household." –One of the girls who had never been to school, Siraha

Compelled to do daily labour: Many families are compelled to engage in daily labour to fulfil fundamental needs. This leads to two issues, firstly children missed classes, which affects their learning; and secondly, they are afraid of punishment in schools.

During FGDs with parents, it was revealed that because of their poor economic status, they must engage in the field, and thus, not being able to provide proper care for their children was an important reason for girls dropping out of school. Most Musahar parents are used to working either outside their community or country for daily wages to manage the family's needs.

The analysis of the study context shows that higher priority is given to supporting family (e.g., caring for siblings, field work, daily wage labour, etc.) than schooling by parents. Additionally, lack of awareness of existing provisions and labour laws were key reasons behind girls not going to school and dropping out.

"I have the pressure of completing all the household chores and taking care of my siblings. So, I couldn't go to school. I couldn't complete my homework and always fear of getting punished by the teacher at school. Later, I left school." – School-drop-out girls, Surunga, Saptari.

"We have a goat, pig, and cow at home. To look after the animals is my responsibility. Besides that, I must do all the household chores in my house. I do not get time to go to school to read." – Participants of FGD with girl who had never been to school, Sunsari

The study also found that parents who were supportive and could afford to provide material support towards girls' education had a positive impact on the girls' lives. FGDs and KIIs with school-going girls found that where the girls get parental support, they regularly attend school. Girls from those families are motivated to go to schools since parents arrange all the necessary items like stationery, uniforms, tiffin etc. and also encourage them to complete homework at home.

Single parents, and orphan girls: In this context, girls with single parents and those who were orphans shared that they had to look after their families' basic needs and did not get a chance to study. If any family member passed away, there would be great loss in daily earning, so girls would be compelled to do daily work on farms to fulfil their basic needs which leads to school drop-outs.

"My father buys study materials for me. My mother cooks food on time. She gives me copies, pens, bags, uniforms, and shoes. She gives me money for my tiffin."

- School-going girl, Mahottari

"I used to go to school regularly. Even though we are a poor family. My father and mother are very supportive and cooperative. They support me in regularly going to school."

-School-going girl, Saptari

Family health problems: Health problems of family members were found to be a key family-related factor which had significant implications. Girls who had never been to school and those that had dropped out reported that due to health problems in their families, they had to look after certain family members. Even in instances where they joined school, because of the family member's health issue, they could not focus on studies and needed to think about food and clothes.

Household chores affecting access to education: The prevailing cultural norms, which expect girls to perform many of the household chores, were a major barrier to girls' education.

Parents in the Musahar community teach and force their girls to engage more time in doing household chores like cooking food, cleaning dishes and clothes, and fetching water. Parents think girls need such skills after marriage, given they have limited or no economic prospects.

Almost all educational coordinators reported that the reason for low levels of literacy is that most of the girls do not have an opportunity to read in their homes after school as most girls did not have any access to mobile phones and digital devices. The education coordinators agreed that girls are forced to do household chores and other income-generating activities.

"My father is no more. After his death, all the responsibility falls upon me. I must manage our household expenses. So, I work in the landlord's field to earn money."

*-FGD with girls who had never been to school/
drop-out-school-girls*

3.3.3 School-related factors

This study found that there are a number of factors related to schools that play a crucial role to limit Musahar girl's access to education and schooling. Location of the school, teachers' behaviours, school facilities and school infrastructure are some of these factors.

3.3.3.1 School location and facilities

Distance of the school from the Musahar community was one reason behind girls' drop-out and not joining school. In Siraha and Saptari districts, girls reported that they had never been to school as it took a lot of time to reach school. In their communities, there are no schools, and they must travel for more than two hours to get to school. This is one hurdle reported by the parents who said they did not feel comfortable sending their daughters to school. Girls that had to cross the river to reach school reported that during the rainy season, floods meant they had to miss school.

"If we do not attend school on a regular basis, our teacher beats us with a duster, and we drop out". - FGD with drop-out-girls, Dhanusa and Mahottari

A lack of facilities in schools was reported as another hurdle to continue schooling. In most schools, the study team found that the toilet infrastructure was poor and there was a lack of proper water for usage. There were no separate toilets for girls and boys. This was one leading factor as to why many girls were absent from school during their menstrual period.

In some schools in Saptari, Dhanusha and Siraha, the team observed good and hygienic toilets with separate facilities for girls and boys. In these schools, menstrual pads and dustbin facilities were available. Girls from these schools reported that school also provided them with sanitary pads that they could use these whenever necessary. These few schools have a well-managed drinking water facility and taps for students. The students could easily access water during the school time.

3.3.3.2 Teacher's behaviour and way of teaching at school

This study found schoolteachers' behaviour also led to drop-outs. During discussions with community leaders, corporal and other forms of punishment by teachers was found to be a reason for drop-outs. According to community leaders, schoolteachers give homework, but many of the adolescent girls do not understand the things they are taught and so they do not do their homework. In the majority of the cases, as parents are illiterate, they do not have the necessary support at home to complete their homework either. Head teachers from Siraha shared that most of the Musahar girls did not attend school regularly. Due to the irregularity of their attendance at school, they missed their classes and were also unable to complete their homework on time. The class teacher scolds them if they do not complete their homework. Due to a fear of the reaction of the schoolteacher if they did not complete homework or read the texts properly, girls miss classes, thereby perpetuating the issue further.

Parents also agree that they cannot support, offer guidance, or supervise their girls. Due to a lack of guidance and supervision, their girls are not able to study at home and finish their homework. So, the teachers punished these children for not doing homework and not maintaining their cleanliness and tidiness.

The schoolteacher spends most of the time in the office room with Facebook and YouTube instead of the classroom. Thus, we don't like to go to school daily.
–School-going girl, Sunsari

Regarding teaching methodologies, we found mixed opinions. Around half of the girls expressed that the teachers' communication and behaviour with them was positive and friendly, while other girls reported that teachers are not positive and serious about teaching and supporting them in the classroom. In the study areas, the role of the MnM project¹⁴ was important regarding teaching methodologies because teachers had been provided with training and orientation on inclusive and conducive teaching and learning techniques, as well as other scientific and modern ways of teaching.

The teachers who received positive reports from the girls did not discriminate against students and treated everyone equally in the classroom. The girls also said that these teachers checked their homework regularly and behaved the same way towards every student and requested that everyone sit together in the classroom and play together. At the same time, girls also shared that their teachers punish Musahar girls very harshly. Some of them also articulated that their teachers harass them by saying, "you are Musahar people and unable to study". Teachers scolded and punished them more and taunted them by mentioning their caste. Furthermore, some girls stated that they experienced sexual assault from teachers in the classroom, and the school administration did not take any action when the girls complained about the sexual assaults.

Regarding the teaching style, girls reported during FGDs that schoolteachers taught in a traditional way i.e., the teachers' role is just to teach and present the subject materials in the classroom and the student's role is to listen and absorb them. Our study team did not observe any interactive learning opportunities being provided to students. Girls also shared that teachers are not serious about teaching them and instead they spent time in school on their personal tasks.

During KIIs with head teachers and discussions with parents, the lack of accountability of teachers was discussed as one factor that demotivated students to come to school. Parents shared similar views that the teachers were not focused on the students' learning. Likewise, parents were blamed for not assisting their children and giving time to them to study at home. Hence, there is a lack of coordination between teachers and parents, as they blame each other for this situation.

¹⁴ https://girlseducationchallenge.org/media/iz3aodmf/mnm-street-child-nepal-endline-report_cohort-ii-final.pdf
https://girlseducationchallenge.org/media/m2wp5qbx/14-7-2022_clean-version_mnm_endevaluation_cohort1-final-draft.pdf
https://girlseducationchallenge.org/media/iqojrtul/marginalised-no-more_street-child-nepal_gec-endline-evaluation_cohort-3-final.pdf

3.3.3.3 School infrastructure

Infrastructure and related facilities at school and in classrooms play a critical role in teaching and learning standards because students stay in school for between five and seven hours, six days a week. The research team of this study conducted a field observation of the infrastructure/facilities in schools such as physical space, desks, benches, black/whiteboards, toilet availability, seating arrangements in the classroom, and number of students in each classroom.

The observation found that in schools, most classroom spaces were found to be congested. In each classroom, there are around 60-100 students, which differs according to the school. School records confirmed that most classrooms were

*"I don't go to school, but I make sure that my child goes to school every day. I feel shy and also afraid to meet the teachers."
A parent, FGD Participant, Saptari.*

overcrowded. Benches and desks are not adequately available to all the students. Interviews with the girls found that if all the students attended class every day, there would not be space on the benches to seat all students. It was also observed that there were no facilities such as a fan, dustbin, and shoe rack.

The study also assessed seating arrangements, the number of students in a classroom, and whether there were any structural adjustments for students with disabilities. It was found that there is no provision of a braille system for learning, nor any ramps at schools. Additionally, school facilities were not sufficiently girl-friendly to meet their privacy and safety needs. Most of the schools needed drastic improvements to ensure inclusion.

However, in a few schools, there were good arrangements compared to others. Teachers from Dhanusha district shared that their schools had well-maintained physical infrastructure and well-managed classrooms. They also said that their schools, as well as the classrooms, had inclusive and favourable environments. They said that there are female teachers who respond to issues such as menstruation, stomach pains, and other health issues.

3.3.3.4 Coordination between school and community/parents

This study found that there is lack of good coordination between the school and community/parents. Schools did not conduct parent teacher meetings in a timely manner and did not convey the learning achievement/ status of the students to parents. A head teacher from a school in Saptari district believed that the coordination between school administrations and parents is poor. The head teacher added that parents only come to know about their children's learning status after they drop out of school or fail their exams.

Parents' regular visits to the schools can contribute to an improving school teaching-learning environment and make the school administrations more responsible towards students and their parents, which can help in reforming the overall teaching-learning systems of the school. However, it was found that none of the Musahar parents had visited

their daughters' schools to monitor their performance. During FGDs with parents, most parents shared that they did not visit the school because they must always go to work in fields for labour work, which is critical for their survival.

3.3.4 Individual Factors

There are a number of stories related to personal factors that hinder girls' access to school. Based on an analysis of the stories and other data gathered, personal interest, aim in life and limited life skills and language competency were found to be the most important factors. These factors are discussed below.

Personal interest: Individual girls' motivation and desire towards getting an education influenced whether they went to school. It was found that those who were motivated, and those who had the desire to go to school, are currently going to school. Most of the school-going-girls had an aim to achieve higher education and were found to be highly motivated toward their studies.

Discussion with school drop-out and never-been-to-school girls from Siraha, Sunsari, Mahtani and Dhanusha found that girls themselves are not personally interested in reading and writing, instead they want to do household work and enjoy recreational activities and gatherings with friends. Observations of the school drop-out girls and girls who had never been to school found that their willingness to go to school was dependent upon various factors such as poor income, insufficient food, parents' education, caring duties towards younger siblings at home, and friends; shaping their lack of interest in being involved in education.

Aspirations in life: Most of the school-going girls expressed that they wanted to be in professions such as nursing, teaching, medicine, or the police in the future. During discussions with the girls, their motivations for going to school were reportedly related to their future aspirations and aims. In the interviews and observations with school-going girls, they were dedicated to studying even though they had to do household chores. Some of the girls were also found to be studying secretly because their fathers scolded and punished them when they spent their time reading and writing instead of carrying out chores or income generating activities, considered to be more valuable.

"I want to be a teacher in the future and support everyone to get an education. To achieve my aim, I will study hard". (School-going-girls, Siraha, Mahottari, and Sunsari)

"My aim is to remove caste-based discrimination in society and to create a peaceful community". (School-going-girl, Saptari).

Correspondingly, girls who had never been to school and drop-out girls said that they did not have any aims for their lives. They only thought about marrying a good man from their own caste and settling down in their life for security. Some of them wanted to learn vocational skills such as tailoring or running a beauty parlour or grocery shop.

Most of the head teachers, leaders, and educational coordinators shared that most girls were focused on vocational training and employment instead of formal schooling. This factor played an important role in influencing girls' interest, or rather lack of interest in joining formal schools.

Limited life skills and language competency: Limited life skills combined with low self-esteem, confidence, and an ability to negotiate were identified as barriers towards going to school. In the FGDs with girls who had never been to school, and drop-out girls, they highlighted their views that they have low self-esteem, confidence, and ability to negotiate with others, and do not feel comfortable to go to school because of fear of their schoolteachers and friends from non-Musahar communities. KIIs with community leaders found that those girls unable to do their homework on time get punished. As a result, schooling is an unpleasant experience for them contributing to early drop out.

“There is no goal or aim in my life. If I would have studied, then I guess I would have a goal in my life, but now I just have household chores to do. But I would like to send my children to school in any situation. – Girl who had never been to school, Siraha

“My future aim is to do tailoring and marry a good guy and go to my new in-law's house and meet new people”. - Girl who had never been to school, Surung, Saptari

Likewise, low Nepali language competency was identified as one of the barriers to accessing school, and the attendance and achievement of the girls. All girls spoke in their primary language i.e., Maithali, but could not speak Nepali language fluently. Due to lower competency in Nepali language, girls felt afraid and uncomfortable talking with friends in school and teachers in Nepali language. They also reported that due to a lack of Nepali speaking skills, they could not go to market in non-Maithali speaking communities.

3.3.4.1 Sibling factors

Caring for siblings was another important factor that played a vital role in affecting access to schools, drop out and attending school at all. In the absence of their parents, older girls had to take care of and look after their brothers and sisters. Almost all girl participants in the FGDs shared that they must take care of their siblings in the absence of their parents which hindered their access to schooling.

The fathers and mothers who participated in the FGDs also agreed that older sisters had to look after their younger sisters and brothers in their absence.

Participant observation of Musahar communities provided a sense that older children have to support their parents with household chores and other work. So, the girls may not be able to attend school regularly and as a result, they may drop out of school at a young age.

“I have 4 brothers and sisters. In the absence of my father and mother, I am the only elder one who looks after my family.”
–FGD participant girl of Dhanusha

Furthermore, in discussion with community leaders, it has been found that in Musahar communities, parents give birth to babies regularly. The girls must look after their younger siblings and also, they have to support their parents with household chores and other tasks.

3.3.4.2 Friends and other peer factors

This study found that peer pressure and influence was another factor that hinders girls' access to school. During the study, girls reported that they had dropped out because they did not have any friends in school and had to go to school alone. In the community, they also expressed that almost all girls had never been to school or had dropped out of school. Their friends spent their time doing their household chores, working on the farms, and playing.

FGDs with drop-out girls found that in the school, non-Musahar peers used to bully them at school and call them "Musaharni", a casteist slur, and nobody supported them because they did not have any Musahar friends in their class. Girls shared that nobody used to play with them, making them feel isolated.

*"Non-school-going girls in the community influence school-going girls to drop out of school and join them to play and work in the fields."
- FGD with Girls, Saptari, and Mahottari District*

3.3.5 Structural and socio-cultural barriers

This study found several structural and socio-cultural barriers that were prevalent in the Musahar community that hinder girls to enrol into school and/or continue in school. These practices include beliefs and values, social issues, customs, and traditions. Child marriage, alcoholism, domestic violence, different treatment of sons and daughters at home, caste-based discrimination and bonded labour are barriers identified by the study that affect girls' education.

3.3.5.1 Child marriage

Child marriage is considered a human rights violation and especially impacts girls, because it deprives them of education, health services, and opportunities to learn and grow. In Nepal, marriage below the age of 20 is considered child marriage. Most of the girls and their parents agreed that child marriage is prevalent within Musahar

"In our community, most of the families marry their daughters young due to fear that they will elope. If the girls do not get married between the ages of 14 to 17, then there is a risk of them eloping. So, 14 to 17 are good ages to get married."-FGD with Mother and Father

communities. The most cited reasons were "cultural practices of the community", "poverty", "peer influence", "the dowry amount increases with age", "well off families and suitable partners are not easily available" and "initiated by children themselves (love)". The parents' understanding indicates that if they marry off their children when they are

14 or 15, they will pose less of an economic burden on the family. So, they marry off children at an early age. Analysing the data gathered from different stakeholders, this study articulates two key reasons of child marriage.

Fear of the community: Child marriage is practiced mainly due to the fear of society, where early marriages are widely prevalent, in response to limited economic and life opportunities. After children reach adolescence, community members start to raise questions such as “why didn't you marry your daughter” and raise accusations towards the family. Thus, most families marry their daughters early.

Large family size and poor economic conditions: Child marriage is mostly conducted in families who have four to five daughters and are of poor economic status. It was found that the girls' age is directly related to the dowry which has to be paid during marriage, despite dowry being illegal. When girls are older, the parents have to pay a higher amount of dowry. Therefore, people from the community marry their girls at a young age.

3.3.5.2 Domestic violence supplemented by alcoholism

Alcoholism is a common problem among the Musahar community. Almost all Musahar girls reported that their parents consume alcohol regularly. Girls reported that their fathers consumed alcohol and then

“Alcohol drinking is a routine thing in our homes. If we try to stop, we would get beaten and scolded by our husband who say, have I drunk your father's money?” –FGD with mothers

committed domestic violence against family members, which negatively affected their education and well-being. This also influenced their access to school. All the girl and boy FGD participants across five districts agreed that brothers, fathers, mothers, sisters-in-law, and in fact the majority of people in the village drink alcohol in a way that leads to disruption.

Most girls who participated in the study articulated their views that domestic violence is generally prevalent in their society. They reported that after 4-5 pm every day, they observe domestic violence, and also reported that domestic violence affects women across their lifespan. Furthermore, they expressed that the main reason for domestic violence is alcohol consumption. After male members of the family return from their daily labour, they consume alcohol and start to hit their family members and wives. When women disobey their husbands, they usually fall into the trap of abuse or violence. Mothers participating in the FGDs also stated that drinking alcohol is a routine act in their homes.

During the FGDs with fathers, they mentioned that they usually drink twice a day. Initially, they drink before going to work to alleviate the pain of labouring and performing hard work, and then they drink in the evening after work to relieve themselves from the pain and tiredness they feel.

“In our society, fighting under the influence of alcohol is common. Husbands regularly drink alcohol, two times a day. Drinking alcohol is a very normal thing in our homes. After drinking in the evening and at night our husbands quarrel and beat us and scold us for no reason.” –FGD with mothers

3.3.5.3 Restricted mobility

Restricted physical mobility was also a barrier to girls’ education. The main reason for this was safety and a lack of trust from parents. Parents and guardians do not trust girls because they think the girls could easily elope. Therefore, the lack of trust in girls could be the reason for guardians to restrict them from going to other places. Hence, most of the girls' parents expressed concern about sending their daughters outside the house for more than an hour. In FGDs conducted with parents in Saptari, it was found that parents feared that their daughters interacting with other men outside the house could hurt their image in society. Moreover, parents in the Sunsari district perceived girls travelling as a threat to their family’s name.

Social practices played a part in influencing women’s movements because some cultural beliefs do not support the idea of women going out of their homes to support their families or for training/education. This relates to lack of safety and the perception that daughters might elope. A general consensus that ‘husbands have the right over the mobility of their wives’ reflects these insecurities and has an impact on the mobility of girls. This is viewed primarily as being within a man’s decision-making remit, and women who do not adhere to this are ostracised in the community.

3.3.5.4 Caste-based discrimination

Caste-based discrimination is another main reason for dropping out of school. This discrimination persists despite legislative measures, creating psychological and physical barriers to education and a range of other services for Dalits, Nepal’s lowest caste, who are considered as ‘untouchables’ within society. Most drop-out-girls reported that they had faced discrimination in school, especially from their friends and peers. They also

“In school, everyone from non-Musahar communities used to discriminate against me because of my caste. Other caste friends used to keep their distance while having tiffin, drinking water, and in the classroom. I did not want to go to school due to discrimination”.
–School-drop-out-girl, Prasahi, Dhanusa.

“Teachers, and friends at school were kept separate from the Musahar students and they said, “you are dirty and smell bad”. -FGD with girls, Dhanusha.

reported that their friends from upper-castes never let them sit on the first bench in the classroom. Mostly they reported that they felt discriminated against while drinking water, having lunch, and playing with friends. As such, they do not feel comfortable studying with students from other castes in school.

During the FGD with girls at Dhanusha district, they felt that untouchability is at a peak level in their society, especially for the Musahar caste. Those things which they touch are considered untouchable and impure for upper-caste people. The girls shared, “When our parents go to work at the farm, for us the food is offered in leaves and water is offered in a plastic glass. We were offered food only after people of other caste have eaten and asked to sit far away from them. There is a seating arrangement for people from other castes but for us, there is no such arrangement. They say that we are just Musahar and ask us to sit on the floor and eat. The water that is touched by us is not usable for them. If we touch their food, they shout at us and insult us. They even beat us.” These stories confirm a strong prevalence of negative, de-humanising caste-based discrimination in the community, which in-turn adversely affects Musahar girls’ school enrolment, continuation, and regularity, as well as their overall psychological state, morale and motivation to become active members of their societies.

3.3.5.5 Bonded labour

In the Musahar community, the biggest structural obstacle that affects girls’ access to education is the prevalence of bonded labour. In Saptari, Dhanusha, and some areas of Mohattari, this practice still widely exists, due to which girls are unable to go to school.

Traditionally, the Musahar community have large families and they must get their sons or daughters to work in the landlord’s houses as bonded labourers. In the community, there is still the practice of *Haruwa Charuwa* (Haruwa means to work or plough in the agriculture fields of the landlord, and Charuwa means to work rearing animals of landlords). There is a practice of working in the landlord’s fields and being provided with living and food facilities but no other income. If they wish to do farming in the fields, then they are given a field in Batiya (to lease). When they harvest the rice, they get half, and the landlord takes half.

In early times, there was the practice of Charuwa. The Musahar used to look after their owner’s goats and cows and work on their land. The Musahars would work and take food such as rice, millet, meat, and alcohol as payment for their work. This practice is still found prevalent in many communities, and the common belief exists that Musahars should not read or go to school, and instead work for their landlord.

“In the Musahar community, parents take loans from their landlords to feed their families. The landlords often don’t agree to give out extra loans. So, parents must send their sons and daughters to work in the landlord’s house to look after their goats or to work in hotels and wash the dishes”. –KII with Community Leader, Saptari and Mahottari

3.3.5.6 Menstrual practice

Practices around menstruation were found to be another factor that directly affects girls' access to education. These practices are manifested in different ways.

Isolated in the family: Most of the girls in the FGDs and interviews shared that they are usually restricted to their neighbour's houses during their first menstrual cycle and must isolate in the corner or in a separate room in their own house after their first period. Menstruating girls are not allowed to enter the kitchen, and non-menstruating females take up responsibility in the kitchen. Likewise, they are not allowed to worship or enter temples and have limited or no access to family events and celebrations.

Absence from school: During interviews with the school-going girls, they said that they did not go to school during their menstrual period. Most of the girls in the study were deprived of sanitary materials such as sanitary pads during their menstrual period at home as well as at school. Most of them were using old pieces of cloth and torn clothes and did not have separate dresses to wear during menses. Many girls we spoke to mentioned skipping school during menstruation because the school did not have proper water facilities and separate rooms where girls could change or clean their pads in privacy.

"I did not go to school during my menstrual period due to pain and fear of bleeding that my friends and teachers can see". –School-going girl, Mahottari and Dhanusha

Many girls in the study shared that they were happy using cloths, even when they knew about pads. This is likely due to a lack of experience with sanitary pads or other conventional means and unaffordability.

In the study, we noted that the girls washed their used cloths nervously and took great pains to hide them when their brothers and fathers were around. They also shared that they usually dried their cloths in secret places where nobody would find them.

Some of the girls also articulated that they were using sanitary pads during their menstrual period. Some school-going girls expressed that their schools provide them with sanitary pads during their menstrual period.

"During our menstrual period, we use old pieces of cloth as a pad, which we make from our mother's old sarees, which cannot be used anymore. To date, we have not bought any pads from the market because they cost NRs. 65 rupees, which we cannot afford regularly." –All categories of girls, Saptari, Dhanusha, Mahottari, and Siraha

3.3.5.7 Differential approach to education for sons and daughters

The study identified that inequalities between sons and daughters was another one of the reasons for girls never having been to school or having dropped out from school. The Musahar community strongly believes in the traditional division of work where responsibilities for household chores are primarily allocated to women, with

expectations to also contribute towards field and other work for income. Girls who had never been to school, or dropped out of school, expressed that they do not get time to spend studying at home.

Further, the study found that there was a clear difference between approaches and attitudes towards the education of sons and daughters and their treatment. Though the Musahar are a poor community, they still send their sons to school in greater numbers in comparison to girls. However, after school, their sons are not necessarily required to engage in household chores. Daughters are expected to perform household chores and other household responsibilities even after coming home from school or other labour tasks in the daytime.

“There isn't enough food in the home, and it is not cooked on time, which makes it difficult for me to get to school.” – School-going girls, Mahottari

Our research clearly found that girls do not get time to study, as a result of performing many tasks throughout the day. During our observation, we found that after waking up, the girls start to do household chores in the morning. After this, they send their animals for rearing and go to work in the fields to earn money. After work, they return and again start to perform household chores such as collecting water. As a result, they are left with very little time to study which contributes to poor literacy and numeracy skills.

3.3.5.8 Insufficiency of food and unsuitable mealtimes

Many of the girls in the study shared that their parents go to work early in the morning and return home at 11am, and then prepare food. Most of them articulated that they did not ever eat food early in the morning or before 9am. Many school-going girls expressed that usually they go to school without having breakfast. If they wait for breakfast, they will have to delay or be absent at school.

During the observation, the researchers could see that they were having their first meal after 11am. Delay in receiving a meal is a big structural obstacle that causes girls to drop out of school and affects the literacy of school-going girls.¹⁵

Another issue in Musahar families is that there is a scarcity of food. Many of the girls and their parents have to work without having food due to a scarcity their households. During the observations, many of the girls did not have their lunch and dinner for several days due to unavailability of food. Our observations also found that girls go to their work in the fields of landlords without having breakfast. In the daytime, they have some amount of food at work from the landlord. After work, they often did not find any materials to cook food for dinner. As a result, in such instances, girls sleep having had just water.

In some families, when they cooked dinner, brothers and fathers would finish the food. Many of the girls who had never been to school sadly expressed that they did not get a chance to eat food regularly.

¹⁵ Although there is a school feeding programme in Nepal, it does not provide enough to completely fulfil the hunger of the school-going girls.

It was also observed that often there was no rice at home. One of the girls and her family that were observed stated that it had become the norm to stay hungry in their family. As no one in their home went to work, they had to stay hungry and were only able to cook rice and pulses infrequently. During the course of observation, the family never cooked vegetables and were only able to cook well if they could get grains from their landlord or labour contractors.

3.3.5.9 Effect of electronic gadgets and social media

This study found that electronic gadgets such as mobile phones, TV, and social media such as Facebook and Tik Tok are also contributing towards school drop-out. Most of the girls in the study expressed that they spent their leisure time watching TV and social media.

Most of the school-going girls and parents in the FGDs highlighted their views that social media, especially Facebook, was one of the major contributing factors to poor levels of literacy. They spent their time on their mobile phones and watching TV when they returned from school. Due to this, improvement in literacy becomes more challenging, resulting in difficulties progressing and eventually dropping out.

3.3.5.10 Local government interest and action

Following federalism, the local government has the power to formulate rules and regulations for their locality and has a responsibility to oversee their localities' education system up to secondary level. They have the authority to develop their own policies and implement them.

Though the local government is the formal structure, most of the community leaders expressed that local government officials and elected representatives have failed to develop policies and programmes that are beneficial to the Musahar community or other Dalit community groups. Most of the leaders provided responses suggesting that the local government could uplift the

“The local leaders are only approaching the Musahar community during election time. They provide meat and alcohol at the time of the vote cast. When they go to their office after winning, they forget about our community.”
-KII with Community Leader, Siraha

Musahar community through education. However, it is unfortunate that they could not modify the education system, and that they are continuing the traditional system. Despite both the *Beti Bachau* and *Beti Padhau* interventions, the impact was not evident in the Musahar community.

Even in the case of vital registration, local governments cannot address the Musahar community's needs. Many Musahar girls are not able to enrol in schools due to the fact that they do not have a birth registration document. They said that the local government did not listen to their voice and that they cannot obtain birth, death, or marriage certificates. They suggest that local government does not implement any interventions to improve the education status of Musahar girls.

3.3.5.11 Lacking vital registration of children

The study found that many Musahar families did not complete vital registration processes. Birth registration at the local level is mandatory but most families are unable to register. In Nepal, there are issues around gaining citizenship among Musahar communities and other Terai communities. Their settlement is near the Nepal-India border area, and they do not have citizenship in Nepal. Due to this, their children cannot obtain birth certificates, despite being born in Nepal. Birth certificates are essential to admission into formal education for children and this was found to be a key reason as to why children not attending school.

During the FGDs, a 27-year-old mother from the Dhanusha district shared her experience of having two daughters and their deprivation of education and other government provisions such as nutrition allowance as their births were not registered at the ward office. This was also because the mother and father did not have citizenship cards. The daughters are out of school because they cannot be admitted to formal schools due to the absence of birth certificates¹⁶ when seeking admission. Previous interaction with Musahar parents (during the evaluation for Marginalised No More/ Girls' Education Challenge) have also confirmed that they were discouraged to secure vital registrations such as the birth certificates and citizenship certificates due to long, bureaucratic procedures that frustrate them and take up too much time.

3.4 Policies and practices for access to education

Nepal has made a commitment to provide “Education for All” which means ensuring access to complete, free, and compulsory basic education of good quality. National, Provincial, and local level policies, plans, programmes, and practices all play a crucial role in improving access to education for the most marginalised girls. Available policies and national plans related to girls' education have been reviewed and a summary has been provided in Annex 1.

This study found there are several policies and provisions that ensure gender equality in education at federal to local level. Government has also committed through different national and international commitments to achieve gender equality in education via Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (2015-2030), School Sector Development Plan (SSDP) (2016-2023), School Education Sector Plan (SESP) (2022-2032) and periodic plans. The SESP (2022-32) highlighted that 4.9% of children aged 5-12 years remain out of school as they are unable to access basic education. The pandemic disproportionality affected girls being unable to continue learning due to increased demand for them to care for siblings and engage in domestic work. A large portion of out-of-school and drop-out children and those who repeat classes are made up of the poorest, most vulnerable children and children with disabilities, concentrated in certain regions of the country. However, the implementation status of these plans was not found to be satisfactory. After reviewing the policies, this research explores the efforts made by the local government,

¹⁶ Birth certificates are not mandated by the Ministry of Education. However, local governments are making birth certificates a requirement for provision of vital registration to school.

since full authority to manage the education up to secondary level is the responsibility of the local government by constitution. At the same time, school level policies are also important for creating an enabling environment and keeping girls in school. Both local and school level efforts identified by this study are presented in this section.

3.4.1 Local government's efforts

The study team consulted with local elected representatives and staff including education coordinators at municipal level and documented the efforts they have been initiating to improve access to education for the most marginalised girls. The list of activities is shared here.

Campaigns and door-to-door activities: Most of the consulted members shared that municipalities were conducting admission campaigns every year to enrol out-of-school children especially girls, hard-to-reach groups and marginalised groups. To increase access to education for marginalised Dalit girls, municipalities were conducting door-to-door programmes to raise awareness among the community.

Interactions with marginalised communities: During the interviews, elected representatives shared that LGs were conducting interaction programmes between marginalised communities, local stakeholders, and the municipalities to improve enrolment of marginalised community children, especially girls. They also reported that they were conducting such programmes at least once a month through the locally elected representative and community leaders and local stakeholders.

Beti Bachau and Beti Padhau (Save Daughters and Teach Daughters) programme: All the representatives highlighted that they were conducting *Beti Bachau and Beti Padhau* (Save Daughters and Teach Daughters) programmes in their locality. *Beti Bachau and Beti Padhau* programmes focus on girls' education and improving their educational status. This programme runs under the support from the provincial government.

Scholarship and uniform support to marginalised girls: Government has provided scholarships to marginalised girl students to increase their presence and retain them in the school system. The objective is to reduce marginalised families' education expenditure. In addition to scholarships, money for school uniforms is also being provided annually by the government.

School meal programme: Most of the participants articulated that the government has been implementing school meal programmes to increase student attendance in school. In the KIIs, representatives also said that this was a national programme to increase the number of students attending school from marginalised communities such as the Musahars. They also said that the intervention was very effective as most of the marginalised community students, especially girls, come to school without lunch, so the programme was very helpful to increase their school attendance. However, Musahar girls shared that the school meal provided could not satisfy their hunger as they do not eat breakfast before school or bring lunch from home.

3.4.2. School level efforts

In addition to local government efforts, school policies have a significant impact on improving the education status of students as well as shaping the mind of the community towards education. During interviews with head teachers, the study identified the efforts that have been made to ensure an education for Musahar girls.

We found that schools were managing some interventions introduced by the local government, provincial and federal government. This includes midday meals, free distribution of education materials such as books, scholarships for girls and marginalised girls, and no fees.

Concurrently, funding for bicycles for girls, uniforms and stationery

materials were provided by the local government, though some support for these interventions also came from provincial and federal government. School teachers reported that they are conducting awareness programmes to change community perceptions on education. Some head teachers also shared information about these awareness programmes - however, the effectiveness of these programmes to enrol and/or retain Musahar girls was not clear to the schools themselves.

“Our school are conducting awareness programmes (door to door visits, admission campaign) that support changing the perception of the Musahar community regarding education, and eventually address the structural and institutional barriers that prohibit access to education.”

KII with Head Teacher, Sunsari

Outcome of the study

In the study, ten Lead Musahar Researchers who were previously working with the MnM project and 50 Musahar Women Researchers were engaged to conduct this ethnographic research study. After seeing them in this research study and the MnM project, community members felt encouraged to send their children to school and pursue education. Similarly, upon seeing these researchers, more children became inspired and expressed a willingness to be researchers and to go to different places to learn more about the issues raised. Many of them also added that they will attend regular school and complete their higher education. Parents and Musahar Leaders were planning to create awareness in the community to send their girls to school. Through this study, they seemed to have understood the value of education and that it can empower girls and create job opportunities for them. They assured our researchers during the study that they will send their girls to school regularly. Moreover, the Musahar Leaders informed us that they will make further efforts to increase enrolment at the start of the new school academic year.

Musahar Lead Researchers and Women Researchers also stated their commitment to do their bit for the community. They mentioned that will try to encourage parents to send their girls to school and engage in enrolment campaigns at the beginning of the school year. Finally, this study enhanced the research capabilities of these Musahar researchers

and empowered them to research their community's issues and coordinate with the community and local government to take action.

4. Conclusion and recommendations

4.1 Conclusions

1. Musahar girls and their communities are disadvantaged because of who they are and where they live

Due to the caste-based social structure and discrimination in Nepal, the Musahar community experience deep-rooted poverty, and are not able to afford adequate food, clothes, or shelter.

Most of their houses are made from bamboo, mud, and thatch leading to poor living conditions, particularly during the rainy season. The family size of Musahar households is seven members on average. The family size ranged from a minimum of four to a maximum of sixteen members, who were living and eating together in a single dwelling. They do not have toilet facilities and resort to open defecation in the river basin near the community, in forests, and alongside roads contradicting claims of the local and federal government that Nepal is an open defecation-free country (UN SDG, 2019).

The main livelihood option available to the Musahar community is daily wage labour. They have few options to sustain their livelihoods, to afford the costs associated with the education and schooling of their children. As described below, the Musahar community do not own the land they live on and do not have any land rights. As a result, they are unable to undertake agricultural activities on the land to sustain a livelihood. So, their only work and main source of income is daily labour, which is low-paid work with families receiving little money in return. Some of the Musahar community were also engaged as bonded labourers¹⁷. The need for all family members to support daily livelihoods means that girls and boys do not go to school.

A strong prevalence of inhumane caste-based discrimination¹⁸ negatively affects Musahar girls' school enrolment, retention, and regular attendance, as well as their overall psyche, morale, and motivation to become active members of their societies. Musahar girls' mother tongue is Maithili while the language of instruction used in school is Nepali. This was found to be a barrier to accessing and attending school, and to girls' educational achievements as they felt afraid and uncomfortable talking in Nepali with friends and teachers. Peer pressure and influence were other factors that hinder girls' access to school because many girls stated that they did not have any friends and had to go to school alone.

Furthermore, in Nepal, there are issues around gaining citizenship among Musahar communities. Local governments need to address the barriers that the Musahar community face with regard to official registration processes, including obtaining birth, death, or marriage certificates. Birth registration at the local level is mandatory, but most families are not able to do this because their parents do not have citizenship cards and marriage certificates. Due to this, their children are unable to obtain birth certificates, and

¹⁷ A bonded labourer is someone who works in the fields for a landowner, looking after animals and doing other agricultural work and household chores, and who is constantly taking or repaying loans from the landowner.

¹⁸ https://idsn.org/wp-content/uploads/user_folder/pdf/New_files/Nepal/Caste-based_Discrimination_in_Nepal.pdf

at the local government level schools seek birth registration certificates for enrolment at school, which is a barrier for children's access to education.

Musahar girls' access to school is dependent on various social and economic barriers such as very low household income, insufficient food, low levels of parents' education, caring duties towards younger siblings at home, and peer pressure from friends. In addition, negative coping mechanisms to overcome the socio-economic deprivation they face, as well as early marriage, alcoholism leading to domestic violence, and the differential/negative treatment of girls compared to boys by teachers, parents and peers further contribute to worsening everyday conditions for women and girls. This, in turn, makes it more difficult for girls to access school, resulting in poor education outcomes.

2. Extreme poverty and economic hardship are structural obstacles to Musahar girls' education

Economic hardship is one key barrier that affects girls' access to education. Due to dire economic conditions, Musahar households need to prioritise daily labour to fulfil their basic needs, rather than the education of their daughters. The most common reasons for families prioritising duties such as field work, labour work, sibling care, and household chores is extreme poverty. The analysis of household income status shows that if household income is low (less than \$1372 per year, Nepal's per capita income in 2022), the likelihood of girls accessing education is very much reduced. To meet household costs, parents mostly go to work early in the morning. During our fieldwork, we found that children did not ever eat food early in the morning and went to school without having a meal.

The impact of the poor economic status of Musahars is also visible in the school materials and the condition of uniforms owned by girls. The majority of school-going girls only had one set of school dresses. Due to this, girls experienced a sense of inferiority among their friends, were subjected to bullying and harassment by peers, and were humiliated by teachers. As such, the recurrent cost of schooling was a fundamental reason for the drop-out of Musahar girls.

The prevailing cultural norms expect girls to perform many of the household chores. Parents in the Musahar community teach and force their girls to use more of their time doing household chores because parents think girls need these skills after marriage. On the other hand, a key reason parents married off their daughters at an early age was also directly related to lessening their economic burden. If girls are older, their parents have to pay a higher amount of dowry to marry them off, despite dowry practices being made illegal.

There was also a clear difference between approaches and attitudes toward the education of sons and daughters. Daughters are expected to perform household chores and other household responsibilities even after coming home from school or other labour tasks in the daytime. The widely prevalent traditional understanding that "girls are born to care for their family and siblings and to do household chores, education is not necessary for them" should be minimised through multiple efforts.

It is clear that poverty and economic hardship were the most prominent barriers to Musahar girls' education.

3. School-based factors further discourage Musahar girls and their parents from investing time and resources to go to school

In addition to economic hardship and household chores, school-based factors played a key role in keeping Musahar girls out of school. The unpleasant school experiences of girls were further worsened by obstacles such as travelling up to two hours to reach school, fear of harassment while travelling, a lack of separate latrines for girls and boys, unsupportive teacher behaviour and methods of teaching at school. Girls were found to be skipping school during menstruation because the school did not have proper water and latrine facilities or separate rooms where girls could change or clean in privacy. Furthermore, girls did not have separate dresses to wear and were compelled to use old pieces of cloth and torn clothes.

Girls faced clear caste-based discrimination, while drinking water, having lunch, and playing with friends, including bullying by teachers and peers in the school. Therefore, they did not feel comfortable studying with students from other castes.

At school, girls neither clearly understood the language of instruction (Nepali) of the teachers nor did they receive support from teachers. Class teachers frequently scold girls when they do not complete their homework, leading to frustration among girls and a reluctance to enrol and/or continue school. Instead, many girls described that they prefer to spend time playing games with friends rather than going to school.

Infrastructure and related facilities at school and in the classroom play a critical role in delivering quality teaching and learning. In most schools, the infrastructure/facilities such as the physical space, desks, benches, black/whiteboard, availability of toilets, seating arrangements in the classroom, and the number of students in each classroom were inadequate. There were also no structural adjustments for students with disabilities. For example, there was no provision for a Braille system for learning and no ramps for students with physical disabilities. Additionally, school facilities were not sufficiently girl-friendly to meet their privacy and safety needs.

4. Government policies are in place to ensure that Musahar girls are not disadvantaged by their caste or socio-economic status, but they are not being implemented effectively

Over the years, several policies and provisions have been introduced to ensure gender equality in education at federal and local levels. All three layers of government have pledged different national and international commitments to achieve gender equality in education; however, the implementation status of these plans was not found to be satisfactory.

Local governments are mainly responsible for developing policies managing the education system up to the secondary school level. However, local governments have made little meaningful effort except for a few campaigns, interaction programmes, and

door-to-door activities in collaboration with schools. The few efforts jointly conducted by the school and some local governments (such as enrolment campaigns and the door-to-door visits by schools) did not have much influence in bringing the most marginalised girls to school and keeping them there. The effectiveness of programmes designed to enrol and/or retain Musahar girls was not clear to the schools themselves. Hence, this study found there were no specific and effective interventions that helped to improve access and support for Musahar girls to continue their education.

Local governments are only focused on implementing the federal and provincial level interventions through schools. Some ongoing interventions such as *Beti Bachau and Beti Padhau* (Save Girl and Teach Girl) providing scholarships, meals, and uniforms to marginalised girls do exist, among others, but these are either at the province level or the federal level. They also do not seem to have any substantial impact on Musahar girls, because the interventions were designed broadly for girls, but do not address the specific needs of Musahar girls.

5. As a result of the Ethnographic Participatory Research approach, Musahar girls and their communities are more aware of the benefits of education and are taking some action to campaign for greater access to education

This ethnographic research study was carried out by ten Lead Musahar researchers who had previously worked with the MnM project and 50 Musahar Women Researchers. The community members were inspired to send their children to school and seek education after witnessing them in this research study and the MnM initiative. More children expressed an interest in becoming researchers and travelling to different locations to learn more about the issues raised after seeing these researchers. Many of them also stated that they will return to regular school and finish their education. The parents and Musahar officials intended to raise community awareness about the importance of sending their daughters to school and appeared to understand the importance of this throughout this study.

4.2 Recommendations

Based on our research, we have developed the following recommendations. These recommendations have been based on the analysis of the findings of the study. However, we have tried our best to ensure a participatory approach. Therefore, before finalising the recommendations in this report, the lead researchers and field members also presented their findings and recommendations based on their field experience, which were taken in consideration for this final version. Overall recommendations are given below:

Development partners

Firstly, in this study, economic hardship caused and perpetuated by caste-based discrimination is identified as one of the main barriers to Musahar girls' education. To overcome this barrier, we recommend the following interventions:

- 1. Sustainable support to the community to emphasise the importance of education:** This is the first participatory ethnographic research conducted in the Musahar community. There are currently no major stakeholders working in these communities. In the past, the '*Breaking the Bond*' and '*Marginalized No More*' projects were implemented but they have now been phased out. There is still a need for long-term advocacy in this community to highlight girls' education issues as well as boys' education to some extent. As a result, sustained support for the community in order to build their capacity to advocate and strengthen their voice for education must be developed.
- 2. Post-research and intervention support:** Researchers and organisations must focus on supporting the community post their interventions and studies to assist communities in developing strategies for actioning the research that has been done. In addition, they must also support Musahar girls to form their own research community through more support for research.
- 3. Sustainable livelihood support intervention:** Support for sustainable livelihood interventions such as vocational skills training and small-scale enterprises need to be developed for the families of Musahar girls. Furthermore, partners running these interventions should collaborate with the local government to conceptualise and implement them.
- 4. Schooling programmes:** The study found that most Musahar girls are out of school. To overcome these educational barriers, there is a necessity to run alternative and flexible schooling programmes in their own community at least until they achieve basic skills (i.e., Grades 1-8). Partners should also coordinate with the federal and local governments to implement a complete schooling programme in their wards up to the secondary school level (Grades 9-12) for Musahar and other marginalised communities. In this programme, girls should have hostel facilities with free school materials, uniforms, and meals. They should also have access to tutors and extra learning support before and after school. Finally, there is also a need to run early child development programmes.
- 5. Skills-based training:** Design and roll out skills-based training for out-of-school and drop-out-girls who are above 15 years old, especially for Musahar girls and boys to complete a basic level of education (i.e., Grade 8) that leads to income generation and potentially reduces the extreme poverty among Musahar households.
- 6. Physical and infrastructural support to schools:** Our study provides evidence that there is a deficiency of facilities such as physical space, desks, benches, black/whiteboard, fans, toilets, and seating arrangements in the classrooms. To overcome these barriers, there is a necessity to support schools in enhancing these facilities.
- 7. Political and Economic Analysis (PEA):** A PEA of the Musahar community must be carried out by researchers to contribute to the broader understanding of how the political economy of caste in Nepal continues to impoverish the Musahar community

and inhibit their children's access to education. This is critical in challenging the perspective that Musahars do not value education or that they are unaware of the benefits of education. Furthermore, the Nepal National Musahar Association (NNMA), community leaders, and other Dalit castes should work together to improve girls' education and livelihood prospects.

Federal and local government of Nepal

- 8. Carry out campaigns for ensuring birth certificates to Musahar children:** The local governments should conduct exclusive birth registration campaigns within the Musahar community. There should also be special provisions for households whose children are ineligible for enrolment in school due to a lack of birth certificates.
- 9. Prioritise more investment in marginalised girls' education:** The Federal/provincial/local governments should prioritise investment in girls' education, especially Musahar girls and the most marginalised Dalit communities.
- 10. Formulate flexible and alternative schooling policies:** The government of Nepal should formulate and implement a flexible and alternative schooling policy and programme for the Musahar communities and other severely marginalised communities. Local government should take the initiative to implement all of the provisions in national policies; and coordinate closely with the other stakeholders and development partners to improve the education of marginalised communities.
- 11. Rigorous supervision by local government:** After the federal government in Nepal, local governments are the main authority and have responsibility for managing, supervising, and ensuring the quality of education. Local governments should conduct school supervision and bring in other non-government organisations who are working in the field of education. They should also carry out routine assessments of schools to maintain standards throughout the year.
- 12. Develop a five-year master plan:** Local governments should develop a five-year master plan to ensure a quality education for Musahar children and other marginalised children. They should also allocate sufficient budget to implement this plan in coordination with the provincial and federal government of Nepal.

Schools

- 13. Better collaboration and coordination:** Establish better collaboration and coordination among schools, students, parents, and local governments to increase access to education for Musahar children and children from other marginalised communities.
- 14. School Improvement Plans:** Prepare School Improvement Plans (SIPs) that have a special focus on providing an inclusive and conducive school environment for all students, Musahar and marginalised Dalit girls in particular; and ensure that teachers are trained in gender-responsive classroom delivery. Head teachers must ensure and promote an inclusive and conducive learning environment in their schools.

15.Improved school infrastructure: Coordinate with the local government to improve the school infrastructure with minimum standards for classrooms, playgrounds, latrines for boys and girls, water facilities for WASH services, as well as properly adapted facilities for disabled students.

Community and Parents

16.Support to Musahar girls to enrol in school: Community Leaders and Musahar girls' parents must encourage girls to enrol in formal schooling and participate in school enrolment campaigns and oversee whether their children have done their homework or not.

17.Prepare meals and other school materials before going to school: Musahar girls' parents must prepare meals and other school materials such as dress, copy, pen/pencil, ink, and books.

18.Special attention for cleanliness and washing school dress: Parents should give special attention and encouragement to their children for cleanliness and facilitate washing their school dress regularly. They should also ensure that their children have neat and clean clothes when attending school.

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Annex 1: Policies and Practices

National Policies to Access Education for Most Marginalised Dalit Girls

Article 31 of the Constitution of Nepal under the fundamental rights, states that every citizen shall have the right to access basic education (31(1)), and every citizen shall have the right to compulsory and free education up to the basic level and free education up to the secondary level from the state (31(2)). The constitution has envisioned the provision of basic and secondary education as the authority of local government. Article 11(Ja) of the Act describes what is meant by basic and secondary education.

The constitution under article 31 and subsections 1 and 2 has guaranteed the right to access a basic level of education, compulsory and free education up to the basic level, and free education up to the secondary level. It has also guaranteed the right to free higher education for disabled and economically weaker citizens, and the right to get an education in their mother language to every Nepali community. (Constitution of Nepal, 2015)

Article 40 of the constitution, under the right to Dalits, states that free education with scholarships must be provided for Dalit students from primary to higher levels of education and provided in technical and professional subjects (40(2)). The constitution also ensures making higher education easily available, of high quality, and accessible, and gradually making it free (Constitution of Nepal, 2015).

The goal for universal primary education/basic education was to ensure that by 2015 all children, particularly girls, children in difficult circumstances, and those belonging to disadvantaged castes and ethnic minority groups, have universal access to and participation in completely free and compulsory primary/basic education of good quality.

The Seventh Plan (1985-1990) recognised primary education as one of the basic needs of people and made a provision for the initiation of compulsory education by municipalities. The Plan put forth various programmes, such as free education up to Grade 5, free textbooks, and free education for girls, to achieve the target of the primary education expansion policy by 2000.

The Eighth Plan (1992-1997) reiterated the government's commitment to achieving the goal of universal primary education and raising the literacy rate to 67% by 2000. The policy of the Ninth Plan (1997-2002) was to upgrade the quality of basic and primary education, with a focus on gender equity and educational opportunities for disadvantaged communities. In the context of making primary education compulsory, the plan adopted the expansion policy based on experiences gained from the field.

The Tenth Plan (2002-2007) focused on decentralisation to ensure quality education, and on providing daily meals and scholarships to disadvantaged groups in order to achieve 90% enrolment rates. The implementation of free and compulsory primary education would be gradually followed as per the government proclamation and commitment.

The Fifteenth Plan (2019-2023) ensures making basic education compulsory and free to all children, along with the provision of early childhood education, and free access to secondary-level education. It intends to make education high-quality, practical, and technology friendly. The plan also ensures the opportunity for life-long education for all citizens. The plan includes an expansion and quality of inclusive and equitable access to technical education and vocational skills development. The plan aims to make higher education accessible, high quality, scientific, innovative, research-based, technology-friendly, and employment-oriented to develop a knowledge-based society and economy. The Fifteenth Plan includes the following strategy:

- Develop early childhood development and education programmes as an integral part of school education and make it compulsory for all children.
- Make all levels of government competent and accountable for ensuring equitable access to school education, as per the standards of compulsory and free education.
- Develop a quality standard and accreditation system in school education to maintain quality across schools.
- Ensure quality at all levels of education through a curriculum based on the development of human resources, infrastructure, technology, and life skills.
- Make provisions for the effective regulation of private schools and transform them from profitmaking entities into service-oriented entities.
- Expand technical and vocational education and training programmes extensively to ensure opportunity and access to technical education, and vocational skills development for youths at the local levels.
- Determine the qualification of education, training, skills, and learning based on mobility and permeability of general education, technical education, and vocational skills development through the national qualifications system by opening up all processes and ways of learning.
- Make higher education-providing educational institutions competitive and results-oriented to produce a workforce of highly skilled and technical people.
- Restructure the faculties of universities and educational training-providing institutions to produce highly trained workers in the teaching profession.
- Develop a results-based financial system to produce human resources capable of supporting a knowledge-based economy and promoting employment.
- Develop higher education-providing universities and educational institutions as technology-based learning centres for knowledge transfer and development, and make the Quality Assurance and Accreditation System strong, powerful, and compulsory.
- Ensure lifelong learning by connecting learned knowledge and skills with income-generating programmes through informal education and alternative learning.
- Preserve and promote traditional and local knowledge, skills, and technology and utilize modern technology propounded by scientific exploration and research in the overall developmental process of the country.
- Make all levels and entities associated with education, science, and technology responsible for prescribed performance and achievement by creating a structural and legal basis for maintaining good governance, transparency, and accountability.

School Sector Development Plan (SSDP, 2016-2023): The government of Nepal has developed the School Sector Development Plan (SSDP) from the period of July 2016 to July 2023 to ensure equitable access to quality education for all. The SSDP states that free and compulsory basic education and free secondary education should be available to all children.

The SSDP encompasses Nepal's school education sector, including non-formal education with basic education, one year of early childhood education, development and pre-primary education to grade 8, and secondary grades 9 to 12. The SSDP also includes the following provisions:

- Development of teaching and learning materials.
- Focus on improving access to safe environments that enable learning, improves access to and the quality of non-formal education, and strengthens peer support mechanisms for children.
- Increasing knowledge on food, nutrition, and health in students and communities.
- Focus on quality learning environments.
- Improve the structural design of schools to ensure the accessibility and safety of all children, including those with disabilities.
- Improve pedagogical practice to improve learning outcomes.

- Strengthening of teacher management through the rationalization of teacher positions and types.
- To promote a rights-based approach to ECED/PPE programmes for developing the physical, socio-emotional, cognitive, spiritual, and moral potential of children below five years.
- Ensure universal access to quality basic education for all 4-12-year-old children.
- Promote life skills and value-based education and teach children about the national economy and harmony in socio-cultural diversity from their early years
- Ensure gender-sensitive learning environments.

Similarly, Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 highlighted the quality education that ensures inclusive and equitable quality education and promotes lifelong learning opportunities for all.

Goal 4 ensures that marginal girls' education is provided sustainably by 2030, ensures that all girls and boys complete free, equitable, and quality primary and secondary education (4.1), eliminates gender disparities in education and ensures equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable including the person with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations (4.5).

Provision for Marginalised Musahar Students

National Level	Provincial and Local Level	School Level
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● National School Admission Campaigns ● Awareness activities ● Interactions with marginalised community ● Scholarship and uniform support to marginalised girls ● School Meal Programme 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Beti Bachau and Beti Padhau (Save Girl and Teach Girl) Programme ● Door-to-door awareness activities ● Bicycles for Girls ● Scholarship and uniform support to marginalised girls 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Implementing the entire National as well as Provincial level educational intervention activities ● Development of school improvement plan and ensure the need of Marginalised Musahar Students ● Annual rewards for marginalised girls ● Parents orientation programme ● Free distribution of education materials like books, copies, and pens ● Teacher visits to community: The school are conducting awareness programmes that support changing the perception of the Musahar community regarding education, and eventually addressing structural and institutional barriers that prohibit access to education

Annex 2: Sampling frame for the study

Technique/Methods	Study Participants	Criteria	Number	Total Sample Size	Settlement/District	Responsible	Remarks
Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)	Never Been to School or Drop-out Girls	1 FGD in each district	5	30-50 (6-10 Informants per FGD)	Sitapur, Mahottari; Purandaiya, Dhanusha; Malahaniya, Siraha; Bhusimahuliya, Saptari; Kanun Tole, Sunsari	<i>Lead Researchers/ Musahar Girl Researchers</i>	Covering Rural/Sem-Urban and Urban Areas
	School-Going Girls		5	30-50 (6-10 Informants per FGD)	Brahamsthan, Mahottari; Lohana, Dhanusha; Simaltoki, Siraha; Dhanupuri, Saptari, Hanuman tole, Sunsari		
	Boys		5	30-50 (6-10 Informants per FGD)	Dathaura, Mahottari; Parsahi, Dhanusha; Shobhapur, Siraha; Duhabi, Saptari and Pharasahi, Sunsari		
	Fathers		5	30-50 (6-10 Informants per FGD)	Brahamsthan, Mahottari; Lohana, Dhanusha; Simaltoki, Siraha; Dhanpuri, Saptari; Hanuman Tole, Sunsari		
	Mothers		5	30-50 (6-10 Informants per FGD)	Brahamsthan, Mahottari; Lohana, Dhanusha; Simaltoki, Siraha; Duhabi, Saptari; Pharsahi, Sunsari		
	Total		25	150-250			
Key informant interviews (KIIs)	KIIs with Head Teachers	-1 KII per Settlement	15	15	Sitapur, Brahamsthan, Dathaura, Purandahiya, Lohana, Parsahi, Malahaniya, Simaltoki, Shobhapur, Bhusimahuliya Dhanpuri, Duhabi, Kanun Tole, Hanuman Tole, Pharsahi		
	KIIs with Local Government representatives	1 KII per Settlement	15	15			
	Community Leader	1 KII per Settlement	15	15			
	Total		45	45			
In-depth interviews	School-Going Girls	2 participants per settlement	30	30			
	Never been or Drop-out Girls		30	30			

Technique/ Methods	Study Participants	Criteria	Number	Total Sample Size	Settlement/District	Responsible	Remarks
	Boys	1 participant per settlement	15	15			
	Total		75	75			
Participants Observation	Never Been to School or Drop- out Girls	2 girls per settlement	30	30			
	School-Going Girls	2 girls per settlement	30	30			
	Total		60	60			

