



Lund University Master of Science in

Social studies of Gender

May 20, 2021

**Barriers to education among Dalit girls: accessibility of educational opportunities in Nepal**

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## **Abstract**

Unequal access to education still remains a major problem especially in developing countries such as Nepal. The caste system in Nepal creates a hierarchy of social groups which has resulted in unequal power distribution and unequal access to resources. The Dalit group is one of the lowest caste groups in the hierarchy because of which people belonging to Dalit community struggle to gain equal access to basic services. Within the Dalit community, girls and women remain the most vulnerable group because of their caste and gender. Dalit girls face inequalities in various forms which have resulted in many of them still struggling to attain educational opportunities. The intersection of their caste and gender has limited their educational possibilities which increases their struggles in various other fields as well. Bourdieu's theory of practice, Chambers and Conway's Livelihood approach and Berreman's concept of caste as a social process were applied to understand the barriers faced by Dalit girls in accessing education and the role of socio-cultural norms, household, and the educational system in creating or reducing such barriers. The findings showed that Dalit girls face barriers and inequality in various forms in different fields. The situation of educational attainment is worse in rural areas compared to the urban areas, because of the persistence of socio-cultural norms around caste system and economic condition of the households. Harmful socio-cultural practices such as early marriage and dowry were also seen as an existent problem limiting the capabilities of Dalit girls. The internalization of socio-cultural practices and norms around caste system and patriarchal norms were also a major problem contributing to hindrances in Dalit girls' educational experiences.

**Key words:** Dalit, Inequality, Poverty, Education, Barrier, Socio-cultural norms, Discrimination, caste system, awareness, household, self-internalization

**Word count: 18, 462**

## **Acknowledgment**

I would like to start by firstly thanking my supervisor Prof. Agnes Andersson Djurfeldt, for her guidance and encouragement throughout the development of my thesis. Her valuable feedbacks and knowledge helped me immensely to complete my thesis.

I would also like to extend my appreciation to Lund University for this wonderful opportunity to be a part of the Graduate school and for all the knowledge and experiences I had the opportunity to gain.

I am extremely thankful to all the Dalit organizations, ADWAN, DWO, DI, and FEDO for their patience and all the cooperation and necessary support that made it possible for me to conduct this research. I appreciate all the support received from the staffs and representatives from these organizations.

Finally, I must extend my profound gratitude to my parents (Nabin Pradhan and Sajani Pradhan) and my friends for their continued motivation, and support throughout my Master's journey. I am grateful for all the encouragement, love, and for believing in me. This accomplishment would not have been possible without their collective support.

## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

|               |  |
|---------------|--|
| <b>ADWAN</b>  | Association for Dalit Women's Advancement of Nepal         |
| <b>CBS</b>    | Central Bureau of Statistics                               |
| <b>CERID</b>  | Research Centre for Educational Innovation and Development |
| <b>DFID</b>   | Department for International Development                   |
| <b>DI</b>     | Dignity Initiative   |
| <b>DoE</b>    | Department of Education                                    |
| <b>DWO</b>    | Dalit Welfare Organization                                 |
| <b>ECDC</b>   | Electoral Constituency Delineation Commission              |
| <b>ESAR</b>   | Eastern and Southern Africa Region                         |
| <b>FEDO</b>   | Feminist Dalit Organization                                |
| <b>IDSN</b>   | International Dalit Solidarity Network                     |
| <b>ILO</b>    | International Labour Organization                          |
| <b>NGO</b>    | Non-Governmental Organization                              |
| <b>NLSS</b>   | Nepal Living Standards Survey                              |
| <b>NPC</b>    | National Planning Commission                               |
| <b>RCRD</b>   | Resource Centre for Rehabilitation and Development         |
| <b>SRA</b>    | Social Research Association                                |
| <b>TRSE</b>   | Technical Review of School Education                       |
| <b>UNDP</b>   | United Nations Development Programme                       |
| <b>UNICEF</b> | United Nations Children's Fund                             |

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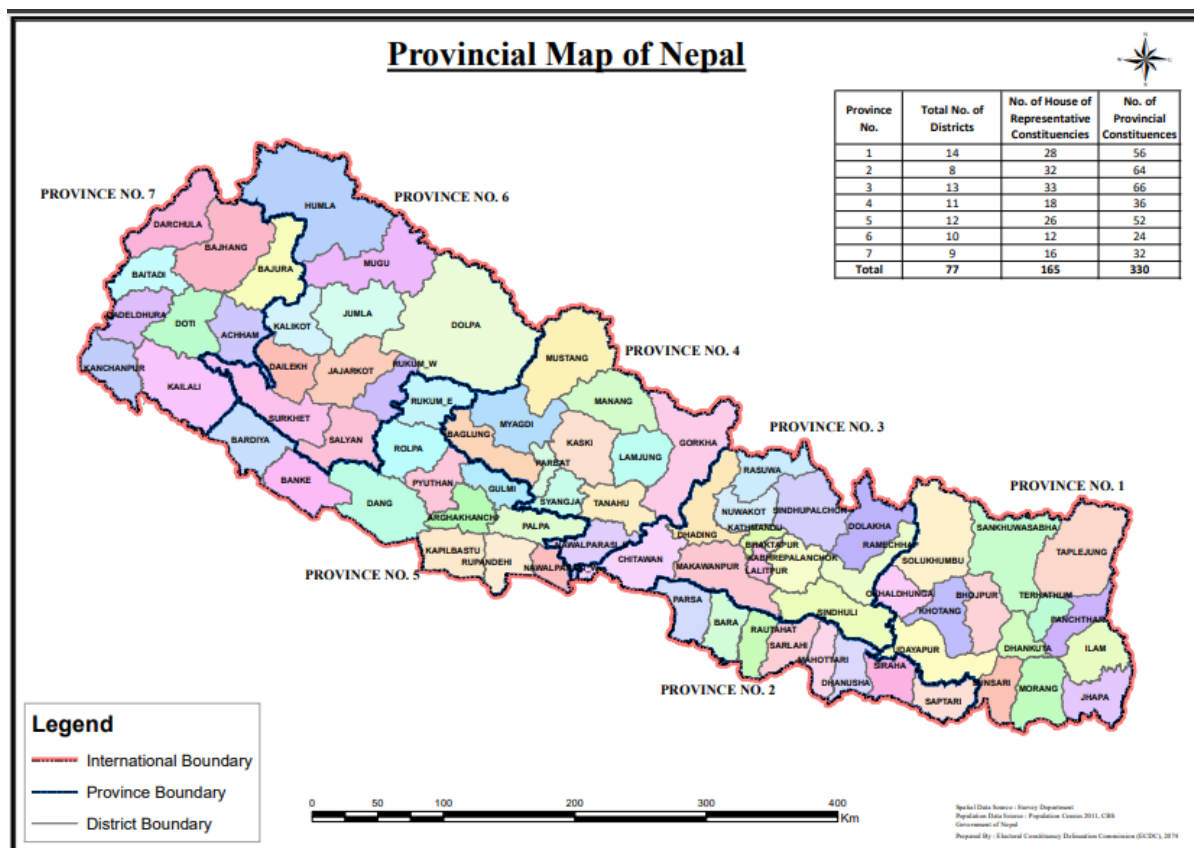
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## **1. Introduction**

Education plays a significant role in the process of status attainment alongside the development of a society. For a country to develop, education has always been considered as a major driving force. No country can make good progress towards equality with an absence of quality education for all its citizens. Education has been universally recognized as a fundamental human right of the people which enhances the quality of life.

However, unequal educational access and school attainment remain a major problem, especially in developing countries. According to UNICEF (2014), in the Eastern and Southern Africa Region (ESAR), 20 % of primary age children are still out of school. Similarly, according to the UNESCO Institute for statistics, 7.57 million children between the ages 5 to 10 are out of school in South Asian countries. Millions of children are still deprived of educational opportunities because of their gender, where they were born, or their parent's income, and many other reasons. Because of such deprivation, educational inequity remains a major issue. These inequalities between different social groups deeply affect social cohesion causing damage for wider society (RCRD & Save the Children, 2014). This shows that many children in developing countries are still deprived of educational opportunities. The reasons behind unequal access to education vary according to the countries. In addition, within countries, such as Nepal, there is a major gap in educational opportunities in rural and urban areas as well. People living in urban areas have higher education than rural areas, and the years of schooling in urban areas are also more compared to the rural areas (Panthhe, 2015). However, the most common reasons for the deprivation of educational opportunities are usually associated with poverty, gender, caste/ethnicity, and other socio-cultural factors.





**Figure 1: Map of Nepal**

*(Source: Electoral Constituency Delineation Commission (ECDC), 2017)*

Nepal, being one of the developing countries in South Asia, still faces many problems concerning the education system. Nepal is a multicultural, multilingual, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious country. The country holds a caste system, which is a social stratification that emerged from the Hindu tradition. The caste system consists of a hierarchical structure that places Brahmans in the highest and Dalits in the lowest rank (UNDP, 2009). Dalits are considered to be one of the minority groups and are one of the most deprived communities in Nepal. Although discrimination based on the caste system is illegal now, it is still deeply ingrained in the Nepalese society which still affects people in various sectors.

Although access to basic education has increased significantly in Nepal, education equity remains a major challenge. Disparities among social groups in terms of educational opportunities are still prevalent. The Dalit enrollment rate is only 20.3% at the primary level, 14.6% at the lower secondary level, and 10.6 % at the secondary level (DoE, 2012).

Socio-cultural practices such as early child marriage of girl child, caste-based discrimination, ignorance towards education, lead to unequal educational opportunities all over the country (CBS, 2011). Within the so-called lower caste groups according to the Hindu caste hierarchy, Dalit women are at the bottom of the hierarchy, because of their caste and gender. They have been treated as untouchables and they face double discrimination because of the burden of both caste and gender discrimination. This makes them the ‘Dalits of the Dalit’ as they are at the lowest rank, even within the lowest caste. Dalit women very well portray an intersectional form of discrimination, violations of human rights, and inequality of minority groups in Nepal. Dalit women are one of the most vulnerable groups facing discrimination in different forms, as untouchability, caste-based and gender-based. These discriminations have a wide range of impact on their lives, in terms of access to education, health care, and other services which could help in overcoming poverty (FEDO & IDSN, 2018). Due to the still-existent prejudice around the Dalit community, Children from Dalit communities face discrimination even within the school from their peers and teachers. The most affected group is the Dalit girls. Discrimination in different forms within the school ultimately leads to hindrance in their learning achievements, which often lead to dropout. The Dalits, Janajatis (indigenous, disadvantaged groups), and girls have very low educational access and school attainment compared to the national average (Bennett et al., 2008). Due to the low educational achievement, it results in a greater impact on their socio-economic and political life and in addition, hampers their human development (FEDO & IDSN, 2018).

The exclusion of Dalit girls in different forms, from education, is deeply rooted in the structural, social, and behavioral aspects of society. The combination of school, society, and the community plays a major role in ensuring exclusion or inclusion of different forms in society. Identification of societal, structural, and institutional problems is very important to understand and ensure equal educational opportunities for all. There are limited numbers of empirical studies on this subject matter, which demonstrates root causes and factors acting as a barrier between Dalit girls and education. Therefore, this study would be an important step towards exploring the systemic relationship between such barriers and the existing situation of exclusion of Dalit girls from education.

### **1.1 Research Objective**

The main aim of this paper is to explore the barriers faced by girls belonging to the Dalit community in accessing education. The paper aims to explore how socio-cultural norms in a Nepali society contribute to creating barriers around girls' education and its effects on girls from the Dalit community. In doing so, the paper also aims to see an aspect of internalization of such norms by the girls from the Dalit community as well and the effects of such internalization in their acquisition of education. This paper also focuses on how the educational system itself enforces discriminatory attitudes or behaviors through various actors within it. In addition, the paper also explores the important role of the educational environment and the curriculum for proper educational accessibility and experiences of Dalit girls. Hence, with this paper, I intend to uncover how social norms around caste and gender intersect with poverty/marginalization to exclude Dalit girls from education.

To explore the underlying issues acting as barriers for Dalit girls, this study focuses on mainly three areas, Poverty/marginalization, Educational system, and Socio-cultural norms. With these three areas in mind, this paper will address the following research questions (RQs):

1. How does poverty and inequality affect the educational opportunities for Dalit girls?
2. Based on caste and gender, how and in what ways does the educational system exclude Dalit girls?
3. How do the norms at the household level act as a barrier to the educational possibilities of Dalit girls and how does poverty intersect with this?
4. How do Dalit girls internalize the Socio-cultural norms around the caste system?

## **1.2 Thesis Outline**

The first chapter of the thesis introduced the topic of the paper and provided a brief background, presenting the significance of this study. The chapter also presented the Research objective and the research questions of the paper. The second chapter consists of the literature review or previous researches relevant to the paper. The third chapter outlines the theoretical framework used for analyzing the findings of this paper. The fourth chapter provides a methodological discussion, presenting the method used to collect data and carry out this study. It includes the research design, Data collection, Sampling strategy, Limitations, Ontological and epistemological stance, Positionality and reflexivity, validity and reliability, and ethical considerations of the research. The fifth chapter discusses the empirical findings of the study and analyzes the findings using the theoretical framework to address the research questions. The final chapter concludes the study by providing a summary of the findings and analysis of the paper.

## **2. Previous Research and Background**

Nepal is a multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-cultural and multi-lingual country. However, the Hindu religion and the caste system hold a hegemonic role in Nepalese society. The caste system stems from the ancient religious texts (Manusmriti), codes, and traditions and was formalized by the 1854 civil code. In 1963, an amendment to

the old civil code legally abolished the caste system, which included untouchability. However, the caste system is still prevalent in Nepali society and so is discrimination based on it (ILO, 2005)

## **2.1 Caste system in Nepal**

Caste may be defined as “a small group of persons characterized by endogamy, hereditary membership, and a specific lifestyle which might also include pursuing of particular traditional occupation which is associated with the ritual status in a hierarchical system” (Béteille 1965:46). A caste system may be defined as “a system of birth-ascribed stratification of a socio-cultural pluralism and a hierarchical interaction” (Berreman, 1967:70). Whereas, according to Sinha (1967:94), “Caste may be defined as a hierarchy of endogamous groups which is organized in a characteristic hereditary division of labor”.

Traditionally, the organization of Hindu society was divided into different groups, also known as castes, where each group was associated with a specific occupation. The Brahmans, who are of the highest rank were associated with priests, Chhetris who are on the second rank were associated with warriors, Vaishya the third-ranked caste were associated with merchants, and the lowest ranking caste, the Sudras (also called Dalits) were considered to be untouchables and were associated with only service caste (Subedi, 2011). Within the Dalit castes, the Dalits are categorized as Hill Dalits who live in the mountain areas of Nepal and Terai Dalits who are also called Madhesi Dalits who live on the Terai belt of Nepal. Figure 2 below, shows the representation of caste hierarchy in Nepal.



**Figure 2: Caste Hierarchy in Nepal (1854 National Code)**

*(Source: World Bank/DFID, 2006)*

The Hindu caste system is an endogamous division of hierarchy where the people belonging to the Hindu caste system gain their status through a hereditary manner and remains permanent. The caste system ensures a hierarchy that perpetuates inequality by birth. The caste system and its firm rules create unequal harmful practices of defining a person by their caste and treating them accordingly. If a person is born in a low caste family then the individual is inherently considered to be inferior and is bounded to a disadvantaged position in the society no matter what (Subedi, 2011). The inferior and discriminatory treatment of the Sudra caste as untouchables was coded in the Manusmriti and was formalized by Hindu sages in the early days, which was then provided as a guide to the king, and thus formalizing the caste system. The Manusmriti acted as a guide to segregate the caste groups and their treatments. People belonging to lower caste were forced to dress in sackcloth, and eat from earthen pots, and were not allowed to purchase/own property, were forced to live in poor housing,

and were not allowed to even touch people belonging to a higher caste. The Manusmriti stated that the lower caste people were not allowed to listen to the Vedas or their ears would be blocked with molten lead. Hence, education was beyond their reach (Vishwakarma, 2002).

In Nepal, Caste/ethnic groups are divided in various regions and those groups consist of other social groups within it. Figure 3 provides a detailed preview of Main Caste/Ethnic groups in Nepal.

| Main Caste/Ethnic Groups (7) |                                      | Caste/Ethnic Groups with Regional Divisions (11) and Social Groups (103) from 2001 Census  |  |
|------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--|--|
| Caste Groups                 | <b>1. Brahmani/Chhetri</b>           | <b>1.1 Hill Brahman</b><br>Hill Brahman  |  |
|                              |                                      | <b>1.2 Hill Chhetri</b><br>Chhetri, Thakuri, Sanyasi   |  |
|                              |                                      | <b>1.3 Tarai/Madhesi Brahman/Chhetri</b><br>Madhesi Brahman, Nurang, Rajput, Kayastha  |  |
|                              | <b>2. Tarai/Madhesi Other Castes</b> | <b>2.1 Tarai/Madhesi Other Castes</b><br>Kewat, Mallah, Lohar, Nuniya, Kahar, Lodha, Rajbhar, Bing, Mali Kamar, Dhuniya, Yadav, Teli, Koiri, Kurmi, Sonar, Baniya, Kalwar, Thakur/Hazam, Kanu, Sudhi, Kumhar, Haluwai, Badhai, Barai, Bhediyar/ Gaderi   |  |
|                              | <b>3. Dalits</b>                     | <b>3.1 Hill Dalit</b><br>Kami, Damai/Dholi, Sarki, Badi, Gaine, Unidentified Dalits  |  |
|                              |                                      | <b>3.2 Tarai/Madhesi Dalit</b><br>Chamar/Harijan, Musahar, Dushad/Paswan, Tatma, Khatwe, Dhobi, Baantar, Chidimar, Dom, Halkhor  |  |
| Adivasi/Janajatis            | <b>4. Newar</b>                      | <b>4 Newar</b><br>Newar  |  |
|                              | <b>5. Janajati</b>                   | <b>5.1 Hill/Mountain Janajati</b><br>Tamang, Kumal, Sunuwar, Majhi, Danuwar, Thami/Thangmi, Darai, Bhote, Baramu/Bramhu, Pahari, Kusunda, Raji, Raute, Chepang/Praja, Hayu, Magar, Chyantal, Rai, Sherpa, Bhujel/Gharti, Yakha, Thakali, Limbu, Lepcha, Bhote, Byansi, Jirel, Hyalmo, Walung, Gurung, Dura |  |
|                              |                                      | <b>5.2. Tarai Janajati</b><br>Tharu, Jhangad, Dhanuk, Rajbanshi, Gangai, Santhal/Satar, Dhimal, Tajpuriya, Meche, Koche, Kisan, Munda, Kusbadiya/Patharkata, Unidentified Adibasi/Janajati   |  |
| Other                        | <b>6. Muslim</b>                     | <b>6 Muslim</b><br>Madhesi Muslim, Churoute (Hill Muslim)  |  |
|                              | <b>7. Other</b>                      | <b>7 Other</b><br>Marwari, Bangali, Jain, Punjabi/Sikh, Unidentified Others  |  |

**Figure 3. Caste/Ethnic groups in Nepal with Regional Division**

(Source: Bennett, 2008)

## **2.2 History of discrimination of Dalit Community in Nepal**

“Dalit” refers to a group of people who could belong to different ethnic groups and have different languages but are religiously, socially, culturally, and economically oppressed (Koirala, 1996). In Nepal, Dalits comprise 13.1 % of the total population of Nepal (CBS, 2011). According to the 2011 Nepal Living Standards Survey, nearly half of the Dalit population in Nepal lives under the poverty line (CBS & NLSS, 2011).

In the caste hierarchy, the lowest group, Sudra has been termed as Dalit or untouchables (Vishwakarma, 2002). The Dalits are placed at the lowest step of the caste hierarchy. The caste hierarchy has been deeply ingrained in the Nepalese society because of which it is not only the non-Dalit society that considers Dalits to be impure or untouchable, but the Dalits themselves maintain a certain social distance and conduct social interactions and activities accordingly. Socialization in the society is hindered on various levels when a group is considered to be impure and untouchable, and this limits their ability in the society, having low socio-cultural, economic, and political participation. It also impedes their development in most of the well-being indicators. Caste-based discriminatory practices exist in labor markets and many other areas which hamper and excludes the Dalit community from opportunities to improve their prospects (ILO, 2005)

Dalits are discriminated against solely because of their caste and it's not only the people from the so-called higher caste who discriminates against them but the discrimination happens by people within the same caste as well. Dalit women suffer much more discrimination than Dalit men because of the addition of their gender.

Dalits suffer discrimination on various levels and in different ways. The National Dalit Strategy Report (2002) shows that Dalits suffer discrimination involving prohibition in sharing of food and drinks (38.9%), which means the higher caste do not eat or drink anything touched by the Dalits and prohibition of entry into houses,



temples, and many other public spaces (28.3%). The report also showed that caste-based discriminatory practices were higher in the western region compared to the eastern region in Nepal. The level of discrimination faced by Dalits was correlated to the extent of the level of development in the area they live in, which means that the less the area or region is developed the more the level of discrimination and vice versa (Shrestha, 2002).

### **2.3 Social-cultural discrimination**

In the socio-cultural and religious sphere, Dalits are discriminated against and are not allowed to practice the traditional Hindu rituals, values, and norms in the same way as practiced by other castes (Shrestha, 2002).

All caste groups have a traditional designated occupation to which they are expected to adhere to. The Dalits are consigned to occupations such as Kami (blacksmiths), Sarki (shoemakers), Damai (tailors), street cleaners, and other such jobs which are considered of having low social status (Bennett, 2008). Since Dalits have been bounded by such traditional occupations, they cannot lift their status due to barriers in accessing other occupations and education. Due to this, their status remains unchanged and hence, poverty and lack of other means of livelihood force them to continue with the same traditional occupations. These groups fall at the lower end of the hierarchy and are also called ‘untouchables’ (Bennett, 2008). They are usually involved in providing service to the so-called higher caste people.

### **2.4 Political exclusion**

Even in the political sphere, Dalit inequality is deeply ingrained because of their low political participation and their low socio-economic and educational status along with the government policies which haven’t proven to be very effective (Bishwakarma, 2017). Usually, higher caste people hold key positions in political parties. Dalits rarely hold any key political position which discourages them to exercise their

political rights. The representation of Dalit women in political parties is almost negligible. Although according to the constitution of Nepal there are seats reserved for women, which accounts for 5% of the total seat, the seats for Dalit women are neglected or denied. This results in Dalit women not having the motivation or encouragement to use the opportunity provided by the constitution itself (Shrestha, 2002). Despite recent changes in the electoral policy to support the inclusion of Dalits in politics, the existent government policies to address such conditions of Dalits are not adequate and neither is effective (Bishwkarma, 2017).

## **2.5 Education and Dalit women in Nepal**

If we go back to history, it shows that since Dalits were considered to be a service-providing caste group, they were not allowed to achieve knowledge. In the early days, before the 1950s, women, in general, were prohibited from gaining knowledge, even women from the upper-caste group. However, women from the upper-caste group did benefit in other ways from their male counterparts or family members, which was not the case for Dalit women. The Dalit women did not have any opportunities or advantages and lived in complete ignorance of the importance of education and basic human rights. This was the case for the Dalit community as a whole. Because of such lack of awareness, exposure, ignorance, and marginalization, they didn't feel the need or understood the need for their children to get an education. There were social and economic barriers for Dalits even though the opportunity for schooling was opened for all since 1950. Due to religious orthodoxy, women and Dalits have been left behind in terms of gaining educational opportunities and hence the situation for these groups didn't change much (Luitel, 2003). Being doubly exploited because of their caste and gender, Dalit women held the lowest status in education (CERID, 1997).

Dalits in Nepal have been facing caste-based discrimination for centuries. They are at the bottom of the social hierarchy. In the last few decades, the importance of education in terms of enabling social mobility has increased in Nepal. The

understanding of the importance of education even among Dalit parents who themselves are illiterate and poverty-stricken is increasing as they are willing to send their children to school. However, despite the awareness and understanding of the importance of education, the educational attainment of Dalits, especially Dalit girls can be seen as a gross failure (Koirala 1996, 2002).

There are various reasons why the educational status of Dalit women is not decent. There are various factors behind the low educational status of Dalit women, such as the poor economic condition of Dalit families, which hinders their ability to send their children to school. It is also not easy for Dalit women to access quality education as they cannot afford it with their weak economic capacity, which leads to them not being able to compete for a wider range of employment and livelihood opportunities. Another major factor causing a barrier to access to education for Dalit girls and women is the geographical complexity which makes physical accessibility to schools difficult. All these factors, however, can certainly come under the umbrella of the Nepalese society and the patriarchal views, norms, and mindset of the society which constructs various obstacles for women and girls in Nepalese society to attain wanted education (FEDO, 2020). And, when the women and girls belong to a marginalized group such as Dalit, the obstacles are doubled up.

In many parts of the country, mostly rural areas, Dalits face discrimination even in schools. Schools mostly in rural areas do not treat Dalit children equally and are segregated from other students. Many teachers also do not give equal attention to the Dalit students, which leads to low motivation and increment in early dropouts. In addition, poverty also plays a role in Dalit students dropping out of school because they cannot afford to stay in school for long. Dalit girls are more vulnerable because of parents preferring their son to get educated over their daughters. Even when Dalit women get their education, it becomes hard for them to get good job opportunities, and they have to settle as wage labor and menial jobs (Luitel, 2003).

As explained by Sociologist Hanna Papanek “In countries where children’s schooling faces many barriers of direct and indirect costs, as well as the accessibility of schools, family decisions about children’s schooling, depend not only on available resources but also on what it is hoped that education will do for the children (as individuals) and the collective interests of the household” (Papanek, 1985:319). Because of such rational cost-benefit analysis, usually girls are in a disadvantaged position, as parents are more willing to invest in the long-term economic viability of sons over their daughters. They see their sons as a support for them in their old age and believe that daughters will not be able to capitalize on education in the labor market. Hence, when financial resources are limited, they invest in sons who can have a long-term contribution to the household economy than their daughters who have a short-term contribution. Because of limited economic resources, families invest the available resource in one favored child to be formally educated, while the education for the other child is delayed or denied, and the latter child is mostly girls who are not the recipients of such investments (Stash & Hannum, 2001).

The educational level of parents also plays an important role in children attaining education and performing well in school. This put Dalit children in a disadvantaged position as a high proportion of Dalit parents are illiterate and they have not had much schooling. Many studies also show that when the parents have the knowledge of the importance of education and are themselves involved in non-formal education, this increases the likelihood of their children being sent to school (UNICEF, 2007).

The gendered, casteist, and patriarchal mindset in the Nepalese society hugely discourages Dalit girls from their attainment of education. There are scholarships available for Dalit students; however, it is very inadequate and irregular. Even with the opportunity of having the access to schools, the discriminatory treatment by teachers or other parents and students forces them to drop out of schools (FEDO & IDS, 2018). The higher castes do not prefer Dalits to be teachers because they don’t want them on the same level of status which would require them to provide

traditional gestures of respect. Hence, even competent Dalit teachers are discouraged to attain higher executive positions in schools (Shrestha, 2002). In many Nepalese schools, large numbers of teachers belong to upper caste male groups who have not fully internalized the value of caste and gender equality for the welfare of all. According to the Technical Review of School Education (TRSE) of 2005, the proportion of Dalit teachers is 4% in the far western development region and only 1% in the eastern development region. The majority of teachers were from high caste groups such as Brahmins and Chhetris and the share of Dalit caste was only 2%. Out of the five developmental regions in Nepal, three regions didn't have any Dalit teachers at the secondary level (TRSE, 2005).

The upper caste socialization perpetually transfers the negative stereotypes of Dalit women which affects them in all parts of their life. Even when Dalit women receive well education and obtain responsible roles in public life, there is still a hefty fragment of upper-caste who still acts with the same discriminatory beliefs and the internalized stigma towards the Dalit community (FEDO & IDSN, 2018).

## **2.6 Overlapping Disparities and Discrimination of Dalit women in Nepal**

The Dalit community faces multiple overlapping discriminations which hinder their process of achieving an equal platform in society. Compared to other social groups, the Dalits are poorer and live in poverty.

According to the Nepal Living Standard Survey of 2010, the proportion of the Dalit population below the poverty line is approximately 42%, which is 17% point higher than the national average of Nepal which is 25.2%. The survey also found that 86% of Dalit households have an income lower than the national average.

The Nepal Living Standards Survey (NLSS) II found that poor families were less likely to enroll their children and especially girls in primary school. Poverty was seen to affect the schooling of girls much more than for boys. The patriarchal norms of the

Hindu caste system are deeply ingrained in the Dalit community as well, because of which Dalit women are disadvantaged in various areas compared to men. Women have much lower economic and educational status than men. The political representation of Dalit women is also very low comparatively. The data on literacy rates show the gender disparity among Dalits, where 44% of Dalit men are literates and only 24% of Dalit women were reported to be able to read and write basic sentences. The gender gap in the enrolment of children in schools is higher in poorer households compared to richer households (UNICEF, 2007).

Therefore, the Dalit community still faces various forms of discrimination in different fields through various actors. Dalit girls and women being the most vulnerable groups, face multiple overlapping discriminations which affect their livelihood, capabilities, and equity status in society. Their acquisition of resources and services such as education and employment are hindered by various barriers, which will be discussed in this paper with the help of useful concepts and theoretical frameworks.

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

This chapter will present the Theoretical framework and concepts used in this paper. This paper will adopt Pierre Bourdieu's (1977) theory of practice, the Livelihood approach by Robert Chambers and Gordon R. Conway (1992), and Gerald D. Berreman's (1967) concept of caste as a social process. These three concepts and approaches will be merged and used to analyze different sections of the findings.

This chapter will also provide a preview into how Bourdieu's framework and concepts of theory and practice, Chambers and Conway's livelihood approach, and Berreman's concepts of caste as a social process will be applied to the Analysis of the findings of this paper.

### **3.1 Livelihood Approach: Chambers and Conway (1992)**

Chambers and Conway's Livelihood approach or perspective focuses on analyzing how people in different places live or sustain their lives in different ways. In other words, it is also defined as "the means of gaining a living" or "a combination of the resources used and the activities undertaken in order to live". This approach has been useful in analyzing descriptively to explore the interactions and activities with an emphasis on the diversity of how people make their living (Scoones, 2009). This paper will focus on two concepts of Chambers and Conway's livelihood approach: Capability and equity.

#### **3.1.1 Capability**

The concept of capability was introduced by Amartya Sen, which refers to what "a person is capable of doing and being and their ability to perform certain basic roles" (Chambers and Conway, 1992: 4). These capabilities include various functioning such as being able to feed themselves adequately, ability to be clothed comfortably, to be able to lead their life with respect and dignity, ability to build and maintain social networks, to be able to be updated on recent ongoing around them and to be able to escape morbidity and preventable mortality (Sen 1987; Dreze and Sen, 1990). Conway and Chambers (1992) refer to Sen to convey that livelihood capabilities also include certain subsets within in such as being able to find and utilize livelihood opportunities and also the ability to cope with stress and shocks. The quality of life determines the capabilities of people and those include being able to perform valued activities and their ability to choose and perform such activities. The livelihood approach stresses on the meaning of capability to live a quality life is different for different groups of people living in different places and especially how such meanings are different for people with a poor background.

#### **3.1.2 Equity**

Chambers and Conway go beyond the conventional measurement of equity of income distribution and view it in a broader perspective. They refer to equity as "less unequal

distribution of assets, capabilities, and opportunities and especially enhancement of those of the most deprived” (Chambers and Conway, 1992: 4). Equity is both an end and a means which means that equity must ensure adequate and decent livelihood for all. In addition, Equity in assets and access is seen to be essential to maintain or gain a decent and adequate livelihood.

In this paper, the concept of capabilities, equity, and sustainability will be used to analyze the different aspects of the findings. It will be used to analyze how the capabilities of Dalit households limit the ability of Dalit girls to access education. It will further be helpful to examine the correlation between the quality of life and utilization of opportunities concerning Dalit households. Equity will be used alongside the capability to analyze the uneven assets and access of Dalits constrains the opportunities for Dalit girls.

### **3.2 Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of practice**

Bourdieu’s approach has been seen as useful in analyzing power in development and social change processes. Bourdieu’s theory of practice will be applied to investigate the barriers faced by Dalit girls and women on different levels when accessing education. The theory of practice acknowledges social structures, the internalization of social norms and their interrelation with practices, and how such norms and practices condition the perception of people in a society. The theory comprises four key concepts: Habitus, practice, field, and different forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1977).

#### **3.2.1 Merging Livelihood approach with Bourdieu’s theory of practice**

Habitus is a social structure or a system that shapes people in forms of lasting dispositions, capacities, and structured predispositions for them to think, feel and act in certain determined ways (Wacquant 2005: 316, cited in Navarro 2006: 16). It is a history carried within individuals but is created through a more social process rather than on an individual level (Navarro, 2006). According to Bourdieu, Field is where



habitus is created and reinforced. It is the social spaces where people act and interact and in other words, arenas of practice. Here, social spaces can be seen as the general notion of the social world. The structured spaces referred to as Fields are systematized around certain types of capital and comprise dominant and subordinate positions (Power, 1999).

Using fields to analyze livelihood, helps to examine the livelihood of vulnerable groups within a structure embedded by power relations. It helps address certain questions such as how the field is constituted, what is at stake in the field, and what actors have an interest in the stake of the field. It also helps explore the relationship between vulnerable actors to other actors in the field, relevant forms of capital in the field and their distribution and utilization, and the “rules of the game” in the field.

Using Bourdieu (1977) with a livelihood analysis helps to differentiate the analysis on a micro level and a macro level to analyze the struggle between dominant actors who have the power and set the rules and the micro-level analysis which helps explore the social norms, institutions, personal relations and so on that help regulate the field.

### **3.2.2 Capital with Livelihood analysis**

Bourdieu has identified four main types of capital: economic, cultural, social, and symbolic. The definition of Bourdieu for Capital is very widespread, which includes a material aspect (which can have symbolic value), along with an untouchable or a non-material aspect which has a cultural or social significance, for instance, status, authority, and prestige, which is also known as symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986).

This definition of Capital by Bourdieu helps compliment the definition of assets in the Livelihood approach. Bourdieu understands capital as ‘accumulated labor’ and “social energy”. Using a Bourdieusian concept with the livelihoods perspective helps to analyze the struggle of power and position, and how capitals are generated,

distributed, and destroyed, and how power struggles within an uneven field contribute to those distributions of capitals (Sakdapolrak, 2014).

This paper will use the concepts of Bourdieu (1977) to analyze the internalization of socio-cultural norms by the Dalit girls themselves and the effect of such norms on the perspective and practices of Dalit girls. In addition to the livelihood approach, it will be useful to analyze the power relations between the higher caste groups and the Dalit community, and the struggles of Dalits to escape discrimination. The Bourdieusian perspective broadens the scope of Livelihood research which will be useful to analyze the role of different capitals to strengthen one's position in the society or this paper particularly, the hierarchy.

### **3.3 Berreman's Caste as a Social process**

Berreman's concept of caste as a social process views the caste system as a social stratification that places people in a hierarchy, allocates privilege and power, consists of division of labor, and includes interdependence of people. The caste system is also seen as "systems of cultural pluralism, maintained by enforced differential association among culturally distinctive groups" (Berreman 1967: 354). Berreman considers caste to be a social and cultural entity that then is expected to remain so and to perform and maintain activities accordingly. Berreman relates the Caste system with different concepts such as Articulation, Protection of Power and Privilege, Continuity, Intrinsic change, and Assimilation versus Exclusion.

#### **3.3.1 Articulation and Protection of Power and Privilege**

The caste system ensures the rigorous behavioral rules, interactional mechanisms between different hierarchical groups. The system permits certain types of interactions, however, makes sure that the caste hierarchy and cultural boundaries among the different groups remain as it is expected to according to the system. Hence, the system allows the articulation of activities among socially and culturally diverse parts of society but maintaining the existing differences. Such articulation is

maintained by enforcing “certain rules of interaction, interdependence, hierarchy, and the allocation of power and privilege” (Berreman, 1967:355)

Within a caste system, maintenance of who holds the power is not done by a consensus among different groups. It is through Behavioral conformity and through the exercise of power and privilege that threatens any challenge to the system and ensures the consistency of the hierarchy.

In a caste system, the caste group at the top of the hierarchy holds a dominant power, and they see the social separation of different groups as essential to maintain their privileged position in society. Each group in the caste system is assigned with different statuses, roles, and power in the society. When the groups are assigned at a certain hierarchical level, the system requires stability in the position to maintain consistency.

### **3.3.2 Continuity**

The concept of continuity explains the power and interdependence among caste groups. When there are economic interdependence and relative economic non-competition among caste groups, these portray the differences in the power among the caste groups. Each group is dependent on one another and every group has a certain social position; however, the ones at the top of the hierarchy hold the decisive power. The organization of castes ensures consistent power distribution adhering to the system and making sure that no changes occur in the distribution of power to not hinder the system. Hence the system requires each group to remain steady in their assigned positions and with the assigned amount of power and privilege (Berreman, 1967).

To maintain the system, those at the top with power make sure to keep those at the lower end of the hierarchy out of positions that may provide them with power and privilege and instead reserve those positions for someone they want to such as their offspring, relatives, friends, allies. There such social stratification is a system to

maintain power relations and the status quo of the privileged rather than allocating roles and jobs to people who deserve or are qualified (Tumin 1953, Buckley 1959). Therefore, the system itself perpetuates a difference in power and privilege among different caste groups and “Keeps power from those without privilege and privilege from those without power” (Berreman, 1967:359).

### **3.3.3 Intrinsic change**

The concept of intrinsic change (Berreman, 1967), revolves around the idea that all social systems are constantly under the process of being restructured or redefined through primarily human interaction. The caste system also being a part of the social structure goes through the process of interpersonal interaction which conditions the stratification. According to Berreman, a social hierarchy goes through a continuous process of being redefined and challenged, and validated by human interactions, although the hierarchy continually constrains the interaction. He believes that change in Power relations is inevitable as the nature of interaction changes and as there are continuous changes in technology, economy, politics, demography, religion, law, and so on. As every caste involves in different activities every day, the ones in the lower end of the hierarchy try to validate themselves, making sure they impose the rules assigned, however also making an impression to manifest changes in the caste system. The system is in a constant process of change where people take advantage of every opportunity and respond to every change. The structure changes over time with the interactions and choices made by humans.

### **3.3.4 Assimilation versus Exclusion**

This concept shows the differences in power and privilege among different caste groups as some groups enjoy the privilege which is denied to others. The ones without the privilege always seek to overcome their denial of privilege if permitted with opportunities. Within the caste system, high caste groups enjoy their assimilation within the system, whereas the low caste groups face exclusion from the system. According to Berreman (1967), for low caste groups to acquire privilege,

they either try to become or emulate the high caste groups or through exercising organized power such as economic, political, and other powers such as education.

However, emulation of other caste groups by the low caste groups has limited effectiveness as their status is ascribed to them by birth and as long as the caste system continues to sustain, the assimilation of low caste groups is difficult. Hence the alternative way to move up in the caste hierarchy is through the acquisition and exercise of power.

In this paper, Berreman's concept of caste will be used to analyze the organization of the caste system and how the system itself perpetuates unequal power relations among different caste groups. Moreover, this concept will be useful to analyze the structural and institutional discrimination faced by the Dalit community and particularly Dalit girls in this paper.

Chambers and Conway's Livelihood approach (1992) will be used to analyze the household level barriers affecting the access of education of Dalit girls. Bourdieu's theory of practice (1977) will be used to analyze the internalization of socio-cultural norms and their influence on perspectives and practices on an individual level, as well as the role of different forms of capital to ensure Dalit girls' accessibility to education. Lastly, Berreman's concept of caste as a social process (1967) will be used to examine the structural and institutional hierarchy and discrimination and their effect on the lives of Dalit girls.

#### **4. Methodological Framework**

This section will present the data collection method, method of data analysis, and the research design of this paper. In this section, the limitations of the study as well as the ethical considerations of this study will also be presented.

#### **4.1 Intersectionality**

My analysis and methodology are inspired by an intersectional approach, which is useful in understanding different forms of inequality better. An intersectional perspective can explain the social divisions of gender, race, age, and many others like caste and ethnicity and how these divisions position people differently in a society, rather than seeing everyone through a homogenous lens (Collins & Bilge, 2016). Some groups of people are far more vulnerable than others and face the effects of discrimination and social norms more. In this case, Dalit girls and women fall under the most vulnerable group in regards to their caste and gender and an intersectional understanding can help in the better understanding of their position in the society and the multiple overlapping inequalities they face in terms of their access and experience of education.

#### **4.2 Research Study & Design**

This study aims to deepen the knowledge on the barriers and hardship faced by Dalit girls on different levels concerning their access to education and their educational experiences. To achieve the objective of this study, a qualitative research strategy will be adopted. According to Denzin (2000), Qualitative research has a multi-method focus that involves an interpretative and naturalistic approach to its subject matter. Qualitative research helps to study the subject matter at hand and get a better grasp of it. Qualitative research is very exploratory and descriptive in focus and it doesn't have a very rigid and fixed design which gives an advantage to the researcher for greater flexibility (Kakulu, 2014). Qualitative research is concerned with the opinions, experiences, and feelings of individuals to produce subjective data. Therefore, to understand the social norms and education norms around Dalit girls to explore the barriers faced by them, a qualitative research design will be beneficial as it helps to describe naturally occurring social phenomena and to understand a situation through a holistic perspective (Kakulu, 2014). This study aims to provide a

description and interpretation of the issues and problems at hand, by including the voices of the participants and the understanding of their experiences which is exactly what Qualitative research ensures (Creswell, 2007).

### **4.3 Ontological and Epistemological stance**

The epistemological position of this study is ‘Interpretivist’ as it aims to empathetically understand and interpret social actions and human behavior (Bryman, 2012). Interpretivist stance has a more personal and flexible research structure that is accessible to capture meanings in human interaction (Black, 2006). This stance advances with the belief that the researcher and the participants are mutually interactive and interdependent on one another (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988). This is a collaborative approach where the researcher progresses with some prior knowledge, however, remains open to new knowledge through the study and develops the study with the help of the insights of the participants and their understanding of the social world (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988). In this case, the focus will be on the understanding of the caste system in Nepal and the effects of caste-based discriminatory practices on the Dalit community and more specifically on the accessibility and experiences of Dalit girls and women concerning education. An interpretivist epistemological position will help further deepen the knowledge on the in-depth consequences of such caste-based social norms and practices on Dalit girls at different levels.

The ontological position of this study is ‘Constructionism’ as it believes social phenomena are in a constant state of being produced and reproduced by social actors through social interaction (Bryman, 2012). Even in the case of culture, this notion sees culture as an emergent reality existing in a continuous state of construction and reconstruction and that people adapt their understandings to a new situation in hand accordingly (Bryman, 2012). A constructionist position believes that culture has a reality that “persists and antedates the participation of particular people” (Becker,

1982: 521). In this case, the social reality concerning the caste system will be explored and the different roles of social actors within it will also be understood. This stance will help give an exposure to understand people's construction of beliefs in the social world.

#### **4.4 Sampling Strategy**

Data collection is the most important part of research as the data collected supports the formation of the study and compliments the theoretical framework and its better understanding. Hence, it is a crucial process to select the proper method of obtaining data along with selecting the sample to collect the data from and at the same time maintaining a sound judgment (Etikan, 2016).

This study will discuss the barriers and hindrances on different levels faced by Dalit women and girls affecting their access to education and further life decisions as well. To ensure the focus of the research and to include relevant perspectives for the study, certain criteria were set when selecting the respondents, such as,

- Belong to the Dalit community preferably female,
- If they belonged to other caste groups they had to be associated with a Dalit organization in Nepal,
- or had to be involved and had adequate experience in Dalit research or studies,
- Be above 18 years old to not compromise any under aged in the study and so that they had more understanding and experiences in the particular topic of study,
- Be a Nepali citizen

There are mainly two types of sampling methods: (i) Probability sampling and (ii) Non-probability sampling. The first type selects the sample using a random selection and with such selection parameter, each unit has an equal opportunity to be in the



selection. The second sampling method does not use a random selection method to select the sample, which means some units in the population have higher chances of being selected than others (Bryman, 2012). The two types of sampling methods consist of other various types of sampling within it. For this study, a purposive snowball sampling method was used for this study to select the respondents. This type of method is a mixture of purposive sampling and snowball sampling. It falls under the Non-probability sampling method. A Snowball sampling initially contacts a small group of relevant people for the research topic and uses these contacts to establish contact with other relevant people (Bryman, 2012). Purposive sampling is the deliberate choice of a participant due to the qualities of the participant and the research (Etikan, 2016). This study focuses on a selection of individuals proficient and well-informed with the subject matter of Dalit girls and women in Nepal and the various intersecting barriers attached to them in terms of accessing education. In addition, the connection with the first group of the selected group of individuals was utilized to connect with another group of individuals relevant for the study which were women belonging to the Dalit community as well as other well-informed individuals. All participants met the criteria essential for this study.

All Dalit organizations (10) in Kathmandu that were reachable online were emailed with a thorough explanation of my thesis and its aim which included a request for their time for an interview. Dalit organizations in Nepal are legally established human rights or non-governmental organizations that work for the empowerment of the Dalit community, addressing important issues. Different Dalit organizations work in different areas of issues faced by the Dalit community and work towards advocating those issues. Few Dalit organizations (4) and 1 representative from a Non-governmental organization that focuses on research on various topics such as Dalits, responded to the email positively and an online interview was scheduled with them on an online platform the respondents were most comfortable with. A snowball strategy was also used to recruit a few respondents. Few respondents helped me to get

in contact with other respondents which provided me with more valuable respondents for the study.

A total of ten semi-structured interviews were carried out for this study. All the ten participants are Nepali citizens and nine of them currently reside in Nepal and one of them abroad. All the participants are associated with the Dalit community in different ways. Out of the ten participants, seven of them were Dalit women who were also associated with Dalit NGOs and three of them were Non-Dalit individuals but associated with the Dalit NGOs in Nepal. The Dalit NGOs that responded to my email were the Association of Dalit women's advancement of Nepal (ADWAN), Dalit welfare organization (DWO), Dignity Initiative (DI), and Feminist Dalit Organization (FEDO) along with Martin Chautari, a research institution. After one interview with a staff of ADWAN, she helped me connect with another member of the organization who in addition belonged to the Dalit community. Similarly, after one interview with a Dalit woman member of DWO, she helped me connect with another Dalit woman member of the same organization. After being in contact with a staff member at FEDO via email, she connected me to a member of the organization who is also a Dalit woman. Likewise, after contacting DI via email, I scheduled an online interview with a staff member of DI, after an interview; he helped me connect with three other Female members of the organization who also belong to the Dalit community and one Non-Dalit male who works in a research institute in Nepal.

All the interviews were conducted online to get the relevant data for this study. Table 1 below shows the details about all the participants:

**Table 1: Description of Participants**

| <b>S.No.</b> | <b>Gender</b> | <b>Workplace</b> | <b>Location of work</b> | <b>Caste Group</b> |
|--------------|---------------|------------------|-------------------------|--------------------|
| 1.           | F             | ADWAN            | Kathmandu               | Non-Dalit          |
| 2.           | F             | ADWAN            | Kathmandu               | Dalit              |
| 3.           | M             | DI               | Kathmandu               | Non-Dalit          |
| 4.           | F             | DI               | Dang                    | Dalit              |
| 5.           | F             | FEDO             | Udayapur                | Dalit              |
| 6.           | F             | DWO              | Kathmandu               | Dalit              |
| 7.           | F             | DWO              | Dang                    | Dalit              |
| 8.           | F             | DI               | Not active              | Dalit              |
| 9.           | F             | DI (member)      | Surkhet                 | Dalit              |
| 10.          | M             | Martin Chautari  | Kathmandu               | Non-Dalit          |

#### **4.5 Data Collection**

To collect data, semi-structured open-ended interviews were conducted. An open-ended semi-structured interview was chosen for this paper as it gives a researcher a platform to keep an open mind about the data to be collected and possibilities of new concepts and theories to be emerged out of the data (Bryman, 2012). The interviews were conducted via online platforms such as Zoom, Google meet, and messenger. Secondary data were also used in order to contextualize the background of the study, to provide findings from previous studies, and to structure the theoretical framework. The secondary data resources were mainly journal articles and research and study reports.

A semi-Structured interview was used as a primary method for the data collection of this paper. A semi-structured interview is a mix of a structured and an unstructured type of interview (Alsaawi, 2014). This type of interview allows the interviewer to pre-plan the open-ended questions prior to the interview and also provides a chance for the interviewee to elaborate and explain more on the particular issue (ibid). A

semi-structured interview is helpful when the researcher has a fairly clear focus of their aim of the paper so that more specific issues can be addressed (Bryman, 2012). The interview process in semi-structured interviews is usually very flexible, which in this case provides an opportunity for the interviewees to share their knowledge, opinions, and personal experiences as well as reflections on Dalit women and girls and their access to education in Nepal (Bryman, 2012).

Semi-structured interviews are most appropriate in exploring a sensitive area of topic and also to be able to observe the interviewees' emotional responses. When talking to Dalit women about their past and present personal experiences and barriers faced by them from different actors on different levels, this method of interview provides an opportunity for me as an interviewer to observe their emotional responses and work towards minimizing any uncomfortableness or negativity that might arise from the interview (Bryman, 2012). Thus, the semi-structured interview provides in-depth information for this study about the experiences and barriers faced by Dalit girls and women when accessing education and help explore the root causes of the major barriers. A total of 10 participants were a part of the research, who were each associated with different Dalit organizations or institutions. The participants were in total associated with five different institutions. A detailed description of the Dalit organizations that were a part of this research is given in Table 2 below:

**Table 2: Description of organizations**

| S.No | Name of the Organization       | Central Office | Focus Areas   |
|------|--------------------------------|----------------|---|
| 1    | ADWAN (1998 AD)                | Kathmandu      | A human rights organization for Dalit women and children. Works for the empowerment of the targeted groups through Educational programs, Income generating Programs, and Advocacy and awareness programs.   |
| 2    | DWO (1994 AD)                  | Kathmandu      | A non-government organization consisting of Dalit activists. Works to eliminate caste-based discrimination and untouchability in Nepal through media advocacy and development programs.   |
| 3    | Dignity Initiative             | Kathmandu      | A non-government organization that works on knowledge production in issues of social exclusion and human rights with a special focus on the Dalit community. Aims to counter the dominant narratives highlighting the pertinent issues of Dalit and other marginalized groups through research, academic activism, policy advocacy, and knowledge production. |
| 4    | FEDO (1994 AD)                 | Kathmandu      | One of the first Dalit women national organizations in Nepal. Works at both national and district level to improve access to resources, social justice, and equity for Dalit women.   |
| 5    | Martin Chautari (1991/2002 AD) | Kathmandu      | A non-government organization working to enhance the quality of public dialogue and Focuses on discussion and research on media, gender, environmental justice, education, health, social inclusion, and democracy and policy issues.   |

The 10 interviews ranged from 50 minutes to 1 hour 15 minutes approximately. An interview guide was prepared before the interview which helped facilitate and provide a sense of structure to the interviews. All interviews were carried out in the Nepali language. Although most respondents knew both English and Nepali language, most were more fluent in Nepali as it is their mother tongue and could

express more clearly in Nepali, therefore, this decision was made. Recording the conversations helps provide the researcher with ‘raw data’ which will eventually substantiate the analysis as evidence, experiences, and examples (Blommaert & Jie, 2010). All the interviews were recorded to ensure that all data is stored carefully and important information is not excluded. The respondents were consulted to schedule time and date as per their availability. All the interviewees started with questions to make the interviewees comfortable, such as about their work background, their roles and aims of the organization they work with, and their motivation to work with the organization. These were followed by more specific questions about the caste-based discrimination in Nepal, its direct and indirect effects on mostly Dalit women and girls.

#### **4.6 Data Analysis**

All the data were audio-recorded and the interview transcript was manually transcribed and translated into English to thoroughly analyze the attained data. The data were stored thematically according to the relevance of the aim of the study using Nvivo software. Storing the collected data made it easier to segregate the data according to different concepts and areas which helped in efficient data analysis. An intersectional lens was applied to analyze the data of this paper.

#### **4.7 Limitations**

This study consisted of various limitations throughout the different levels of processes of completing this research. There are several limitations in this study that should be considered. Firstly, purposive snowball sampling was the selected sampling method for this study, which does not always ensure a representation of a wider group since the sample is selected in a non-random and specific manner. This might only represent a specific view of the selected specific group of individuals and the data gathered cannot be generalized to the whole population of Dalit girls and women

in Nepal. Therefore, sometimes broader applicability of the findings might not be relevant. In addition, with the sample number being small ( $n=10$ ), the quality and quantity of the information acquired can sometimes be limited. More participants from different levels of personal and professional experiences on the relevant area of the topic would have been needed to gain more in-depth quality information. However, this research has tried to include possible relevant participants who could communicate information, experiences, and opinions in an articulate, expressive and reflective manner (Etikan, 2016).

Another limitation of this research was the data collection process being entirely situated on online platforms and the participants being geographically distant. Since the research had to be conducted from Sweden due to the covid-19 pandemic, and the participants had to be from Nepal, the process of getting in contact with them was a difficult process. With no direct telephone option, the entire dependence of contacting was mainly online, mostly via email, or messenger. The responses were not prompt as there was no way to ensure all the approached individuals would check their emails regularly. In addition, the time-zone difference was also a hindrance in efficient contact and scheduling of the meetings/interviews.

Furthermore, since the primary focus of this research was about mainly Dalit girls and their access to education, the current school-going Dalit girls were not interviewed to not compromise any ethical values regarding age limitations. Because of which the data on personal experiences and self-internalization of social and gender norms on the current phase of the Dalit girls were limited. However, Dalit women who were interviewed shared their past personal experiences as well as other experiences they witnessed. Likewise, this study talks about Dalit girls and women all over Nepal and focuses on rural and urban areas, and does not adhere to a particular region of Nepal, which in some cases might seem like generalizing the findings.

The other limitation was that since the data collection was done entirely through online platforms, few participants were not very familiar with the technicalities of online meetings. Such technical difficulties led to delayed meetings and due to a technical and internet problem in one of the interviews, the interview had to be concluded early which limited my data attainment from that particular interview. In such situations, the quality of data has chances of being compromised. Therefore, in some cases, the quality of data derived through platforms such as telephone or computer can be inferior compared to a face-to-face interview (Bryman, 2012).

Another limitation was the current Covid-19 situation because most of my participants were contacted via their official emails, and since the lockdown continues, the offices still haven't regulated as usual which is why it was more difficult than normal to reach people.

#### **4.8 Validity and Reliability**

In the process of designing a study, researchers need to consider validity and reliability to analyze the results and maintain the quality of the research (Patton, 2001). The two factors are essential to ensure a certain level of accuracy and representativeness and in addition to ensuring the consistency of the results based on the method chosen for the particular research (Bryman, 2012).

Numerous measures were considered to ensure the validity and reliability of this research. Interviews with different sources belonging to both Dalit and Non-Dalit communities, however, all involved in different Dalit NGOs and having several years of personal and professional experience in the relevant subject matter ensures the validity and reliability of the gathered data. Data gathered from numerous sources complemented each other and also helped compare the data to ensure the collected data is valid and reliable.



The secondary data used in this research also helped establish and ensure an increase in the validity and reliability of the primary data. To ensure a proper level of validity and reliability, a thick description is provided throughout this paper of all the necessary processes and procedures of completing this study (Brink, 1993).

#### **4.9 Ethical Consideration**

As a researcher, it is very important to keep in mind that we bear responsibilities to the people and organizations that are a part of our research activities in various ways (Bryman, 2012). It is a primary responsibility of a researcher to be ethically sensitive before carrying out any of our research actions. Several ethical considerations were taken into account for this study to be completed with an appropriate progression.

Firstly, verbal explanation about the research and its aim in detail was provided to each participant was verbally explained once again. It was made sure that the participants were given as much information in detail as needed to ensure that the participants understood the objective of the research properly and so they could make an informed decision whether to continue their participation with the study or not (Bryman, 2012). The Social Research Association (SRA) ethical guideline was followed when ensuring the ethical segment of the research, which suggests:

- All participants should be informed well,
- They should be under no obligation to participate in the study,
- They should be aware of their entitlement to refuse at any stage for whatever reason and to withdraw any data they provided

All the above-mentioned guidelines were followed before the interview was carried out. A disclosure to the participants was also made in regards to the use of the information provided by them which would only be used for this study and that their identities and records would remain confidential. Well informed consent was

acquired to audio-record the interviews before the data collection process was instigated.

#### **4.9.1 Positionality and Reflexivity**

It is important as a researcher to identify and articulate our position in the research. Positionality “reflects the position that the researcher has chosen to adopt within a given research study” (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013: 71). The positionality of the researcher ultimately influences the process of the research, how it is conducted, the outcomes and results of the research (Rowe, 2014).

It is essential to recognize that one’s historical, cultural, and personal background has an impact on the interpretation of the data and results (Creswell-Poth, 2018). It is important for me as a researcher to acknowledge my position in regards to my background, mainly my caste. The dynamic of a Nepali society revolves hugely around caste hierarchy and it makes reflexivity and awareness of my positionality in the research extremely important. Taking this into consideration, it is necessary to consider the power and privilege of different groups of individuals formed by the caste system in the society. Hence, it becomes important for me as a researcher to consider my privileged identity and the institutional power shaped and provided by the norms of the society (David & Derthick, 2017).

A researcher needs to reflect on one’s own multiple and intersecting cultural identities and social locations throughout the research process (Collins & Arthur, 2010; Kassan & Sinacore, 2016). These can include one’s race, gender, age, caste, ethnicity, nationality, and many others. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that my caste and ethnic background is different than the participants may have at some point influenced their responses. Considering my position in the Nepali society and belonging to one of the so-called higher caste groups, made it challenging at times in the data collection process. Being a female helped in making a comfortable conversation, however, I was aware of the privileged position my caste provided me

and the difference in my life experiences. With this in mind, I was careful to listen to and understand their opinions and experiences with a neutral position and careful to use appropriate words and language to not make them feel demeaned in any way. All the participants were gradually very comfortable and expressive about their opinions and experiences. However, there were some subtle acknowledgments of the differences between me and them or more specifically a higher caste and a person from Dalit caste. Some participants did acknowledge this difference when providing examples specifically when asked about job opportunities, where they stated: “A woman like you from your caste has much more privilege and chances of getting the job, which a Dalit woman even if qualified, at many times do not, just because of our caste”. To tackle any such “power differences” between me and the participants, I tried to be more understanding and empathetic of their experiences and shared my own experiences of learning about the Dalit community in school and treatment towards Dalit people I witnessed in the past, and this became a connecting point in our conversation to talk more about the need for change to reduce such discrimination.

## **5. Findings and Analysis**

This section of the paper consists of a detailed explanation of the primary findings of the research. This section analyzes the collected data using Bourdieu’s Theory of Practice, Chambers and Conway’s Livelihood approach, and Berreman’s concept of Caste as a social process. In analyzing the findings, this section addresses the four main Research Questions of this study: *(i) How do poverty/inequality affect the educational opportunities/possibilities for Dalit girls? (ii) Based on caste and gender, how and in what ways does the educational system exclude Dalit girls? (iii) How do the norms at the household level act as a barrier to educational aspirations/possibilities of Dalit girls and how does poverty intersect with this? (iv) How do Dalit girls internalize the Socio-cultural norms around the caste system?*

This section will provide a comprehensive overview of the primary data collected through semi-structured interviews.

### **5.1 Poverty/Inequality and Dalit girls' access to education**

In Nepal, compared to other social groups Dalits are poorer and stricken by poverty which affects various spheres of their life including education (UNICEF, 2007). Poor economic status was found to be one of the major barriers for Dalit girls to access education. Economic status is the foundation of a household which determines the opportunities and accessibility of many basic services. The Dalit community has been suffering from poor economic conditions for a very long time because of the hierarchy in the caste system and the traditional occupation assigned to them which are mostly low and menial jobs not regarded with respect in the society.

All the respondents believed with certainty that poor economic condition acts as a major barrier for Dalit children's and especially Dalit girls' access to education. Since many Dalit households suffer from poverty or poor economic condition, it limits their options to acquire resources and services. The Government of Nepal has been providing free education in public schools up to secondary education, however, still many Dalit girls struggle to get an education, and some struggle to continue their education. According to the National Census of 2011, only 24.7% of Hill Dalits and 11.8% of Terai/Madhesi Dalits complete 8<sup>th</sup> grade which is far behind the national average (41.7%). Dalits comprise only 1.6% of those completing 10<sup>th</sup> grade and only 0.8% of those with an Undergraduate degree (CBS, 2011).

When asked about the reasons for the struggle of Dalit girls to get or continue their education, despite free public education, almost all of them responded with the same problem. Even if public education is free till grade 10, that only covers the tuition fees but there are many other direct and indirect costs attached to it. Hence, even if it is called "free" education, in reality, there are costs associated with it and those costs are not insignificant. There are many significant costs associated with public

schooling and even more particularly in secondary level of schooling. The Costs of stationery, school uniforms, examination fees, lunch, transportation fees, and other indirect costs still play a vital role in Dalit girls staying in school or going to school. The 2015 UNESCO's National Education Account Report, states that 48.8% of education costs of school are expended by the households (UNESCO, 2016). The World Bank's Public expenditure tracking survey also shows that almost all Public secondary schools in Nepal charge some kind of extra fees from their students (World Bank, 2006). These costs become extremely substantial to those groups who are vulnerable and marginalized. Such direct and indirect costs, despite "free" schooling, prevent a lot of Dalit children especially girls from getting an education, and even if they are going to school, creates a barrier for them to complete their education and progress to a higher level of education. The respondents mentioned that some of the public schools which are supposedly "free" charge extra fees for extra classes or for hiring extra private teachers as well. Hence, the lack of economic capital of the households limits the opportunities for Dalit girls to access education and resources, as economic capital is seen as an essential form of capital to translate into other forms of capitals such as cultural capital, which here is acquiring education, purchasing books, stationeries, uniforms, and other necessary items to be able to access education (Power, 1999; Bourdieu, 1986).

Livelihoods are largely determined by birth and can be ascriptive when born into a certain caste or gender with assigned roles (Chambers and Conway, 1992). This greatly affects vulnerable groups such as Dalits who are already marginalized, their traditional occupation is looked down upon and not respected, and many of them are economically backward, because of which they have limited options to choose better schools and have to settle with the public schools in their locality. And even in those schools when there are other indirect costs, which they cannot afford, the Dalit girls eventually drop out before even getting a proper education.

Many Dalit families struggle to sustain their livelihood, especially in rural areas. They rely on labor works or menial jobs to earn for the family. A household or an individual may choose a livelihood through access to services such as education or migration (Chambers and Conway, 1992). However, when the economic status is very poor many families struggle to feed themselves and their children properly and in such condition, the direct and indirect costs of schooling creates a huge obstacle for the children in such families to acquire education. When they cannot gain access to services and information, compete or collaborate with others, and exploit new resources, it limits their capabilities to utilize livelihood opportunities to gain a quality life (Chambers and Conway, 1992).

A respondent added that in such poor conditions, many families prefer their sons and daughters to help them in their labor works so that they can earn some extra money as well which could help them at the least to suffice their hunger. Eventually, the children of the household are involved in labor works too, and getting an education becomes a distant hope for them. This could also be associated with a lack of economic capital, which is the monetary wealth one holds (Bourdieu, 1986). Lack of economical capital among Dalit households affects the access of Dalit girls' educational opportunities and forces them into activities to gain more economic capital to overcome their struggle for position and power in society. Another point emphasized by most respondents was about the environment created within the household due to poor economic conditions. When the economic conditions are poor, the environment of the household is not very productive or supportive and this has a huge impact on the children of the household. Even if the children of the household go to schools when the environment of the household is difficult and full of struggles, the parents are away for work the whole day, they don't have sufficient food, lack of supportive environment, and this also affects the children's school performance and demotivates them to study. The effects of such conditions are seen more in the Dalit girls because, the girls are also expected to do household chores and take care of their

younger siblings, which leaves them with many responsibilities with less or no time to focus on their studies. Even within a Dalit household, there can be seen an unequal level of equity as Dalit daughters are placed lower than the sons. As Dalit households have inequity in assets (material or non-material), the daughters of the household suffer from inequity in access such as access to education. Hindrances in assets for household and access for girls confine their capabilities to gain an adequate and decent livelihood (Chambers and Conway, 1992). Hence, we can see from these findings the connection between the capabilities, equity, and acquisition of decent livelihood for Dalit households.

All the Dalit women respondents agreed that girls have the burden of more responsibilities of household chores and taking care of younger siblings which eventually costs them their time and interest in studies. Bourdieu's concept of Habitus is applicable here as daughters are usually seen as the nurturing ones who should have the responsibility to help in household chores and take care of the young siblings. The practice of daughters being the responsible ones within the household field has been going on because of the patriarchal norms in the society. Such Habitus is reinforced as the parents have those same expectations and the daughters continue the practice unquestioned. Bourdieu's concept of Habitus is also applicable in another way here which shows how the social position or condition of the parents is directly or indirectly affecting the children's behavior. The social condition and economic condition, which is also a result of the social condition, influence the acts and behavior of the daughters of a Dalit household and shapes their perceptions and practices (Power, 1999; Bourdieu, 1977; Walther, 2014). Many girls when they see the economic condition of their parents and the household, they take it upon themselves as their responsibility to help their parents with income generation rather than going to school, to improve their livelihood. And when they do so, they further reinforce their social position. Economic factor plays a huge role in the consistency of a girl's education as well. When the economic condition of a household is poor, the

girl eventually understands the situation and feels like her family cannot keep affording her education, which leads her to lose hope and eventually drop out of school.

For many Dalit families, they are stuck in the vicious cycle of poverty, as being economically poor hinders education accessibility of the children and when they do not get an education, employment opportunities are severely limited and they end up continuing the cycle of poverty. Respondents, who have been working in the field of Dalit advocacy for many years, expressed that many Dalit families because of their poor socio-economic stances, even if they want to send their sons and daughters to school, are not being able to do so with many indirect costs associated with schooling. As the economic condition is poor, with limited resources, parents sometimes have to choose how they invest their limited resources in and often prefer investing in their son's education as they see them as their future 'caretaker' and consider educating their daughters as a no return investment and as someone who will be married off and become another family's asset (Panthhe, 2015). Even if the daughter has the capability and high interest in studying, many Dalit parents cannot afford education for the daughter. Because of such perception, the investment is made on sons of the household, and daughters are left to either help in the household or labor work and most importantly also become victims of early marriage, which will be discussed more later in the analysis.

Therefore, it can be seen that the lack of economic capital of a Dalit household severely affects the accessibility and opportunities of education for Dalit girls. Moreover, poverty affects the capabilities of Dalit girls and limits their access to education. Habitus around socio-cultural norms is reinforced within the households constraining girls from achieving equity in their position concerning gender and limits the capabilities of Dalit girls.



## **5.2 Equality of opportunities for Dalit girls and women**

Nepal's Federal Civil Service Bill revised its reservation policy, proposing 33% of reserved seats for women, 24% for people from indigenous nationalities, 20% for people belonging to the Madhesi/Terai community, 9% for Dalits, 4% for Tharus, and 3% each for Muslims and those with physical disabilities. Candidates from backward regions such as Achham, Kalikot, Jajarkot, Jumla, Dolpa, Bajhang, Bajura, Mugu, and Humla districts in mid-western and far-western Nepal will receive the remaining 4% of the reserved seat (Republica, 2019).

Almost all respondents who were also women belonging to the Dalit community said that even though there are reserved seats in the civil service sector for Dalit individuals, the practice of doing so is not very existent. They said that the practice is not very existent of having Dalit girls in the public employment sector is also because many Dalit girls do not receive a quality education when they are young. Most of them study in public schools, whose education quality, as mentioned by one of the respondents is 'questionable'. As they do not receive a proper quality education, it becomes difficult for them to compete later in the job market. Due to poor economic status, many Dalit families cannot provide education, let alone quality education. Dalit women struggle when searching for jobs, especially those who come from rural areas to urban areas in search of employment opportunities. In private sectors, reservations for marginalized groups are not mandatory and many private institutions don't have such policies either.

Almost all the respondents who were Dalit women put forward the argument that even in private sectors; caste plays an important role for their consideration to be employed. All of them said that they struggle a lot of times even if they are equally qualified, because of the education institutional background and one of them also mentioned weaker fluency in English as a disadvantage for many Dalit girls, as many private schools have better English than public schools and most Dalit children attend

public schools. They pointed out that other higher caste women have the advantage of having gotten better education in better schools, better household environment, and many Dalit girls do not have the privilege to grow up in a good and supportive environment with quality education and information which makes it harder for them to compete with other non-Dalit candidates. This shows that the caste system plays an essential role in the 'continuity of power as mentioned by Berreman, that "the problem is not how to get people into positions of power and privilege, but how to keep them out" (Berreman, 1967: 357). Those with power and privilege make sure to pass on such positions for their own, in regards to friends, family, relatives, and allies, and also ensures that those without such position continue their jobs at a level lower to them (Berreman, 1967). Hence, stratification is a system of maintaining power relations and the status quo of privilege allotment (Berreman, 1967). As Dalit girls are disadvantaged and struggle to compete with the non-Dalits, when the non-Dalits acquire the position and the Dalits don't, it further reinforces the existing power relations and interdependence which again puts the Dalits at the same level of hierarchy.

According to Bourdieu (1986), social capital is the network of relationships one has of family, friends, and so on. Having a lack of social capital hinders one's access to resources, information, and knowledge (Bourdieu, 1986). The lack of social capital among Dalit girls and women impacts the opportunities for Dalit girls and women when they step into the world of employment, hindering their further opportunities as well. All the Dalit women respondents also said that one major struggle for Dalit women when applying for jobs is that they have an unfair disadvantage of having less to no social networks and connections to anyone in the job market. They also added that many people flourish in the Nepali job market with the connections and networks they have through friends, family, and so on. But Dalit women rarely have any connections, which opens up another barrier for them and makes competing with other candidates even harder.

One of the female respondents who belongs to the Dalit community said that many offices in private sectors don't discriminate directly but rather in an indirect subtle manner. She gave an example of her own younger sister, who worked in a private organization in Kathmandu and who was equally competent and worked there for few years, but many people who were employed after her got promotions and assigned as permanent staff. Her sister contacted Human Resources (HR) about this matter because she believed she had worked hard for more years than the others and was equally competent as others. The HR said that they couldn't promote her due to her weaker English, although she had equal qualifications and more experience.

Another female respondent who also belongs to the Dalit community also gave an example of her friend, who worked in a governmental institution. She made a minor mistake in her work which led to her colleagues saying demeaning things to her like how she only got the job because of the quota and reservation and not because of her capability. She said that many Dalit women receive such comments and demeaning behaviors inside both government and private sectors. Dalit girls and women struggle to acquire jobs and compete with higher caste candidates as well as struggle even when they do get the job, having to face discriminatory behaviors by the colleagues.

These types of incidents were very common among Dalit girls and women. Almost every Dalit women respondent had at least one personal story to share of discriminatory behaviors and attitudes they faced in professional workplaces. Another Dalit respondent also shared her experience that she was called for a job interview and they liked her, but at the last moment they asked her about her surname and when they realized she was a Dalit woman, they changed their behavior, which was very disheartening for her. She later emailed them stating that she was not interested in working with them as she knew that even if she had gotten the job, she would have to face such behaviors and attitudes within the institution.

Most female Dalit respondents agreed that even if they get jobs, there is a constant reminder that they only got the job because of the marginalized reservation/quotas and not because of their capability. This shows that their social position in society greatly impacts not only their access to education but also in employment and influences the experiences they gain in such fields.

### **5.3 Discrimination within the Education system**

The caste system in Nepal is ingrained very deeply in every sector and aspect of society. There are caste-based practices even within Educational institutions, especially in rural areas of Nepal.

Many respondents emphasized the part that schools and discrimination as a whole in urban areas are seen indirectly and subtly than those in rural areas. In rural areas, the discriminations are in a more direct form. The discrimination is also lesser in schools in urban areas compared to schools in rural areas. However, discrimination is very much still existent. Almost all Dalit women respondents had faced some type of discriminatory behaviors within the school from their teachers or classmates when they were in school. Most of them said that mostly in rural areas, teachers themselves practice discriminatory behaviors which influence other students to behave in the same manner as well. Many Dalit students, and especially girls, don't get equal treatment from their teachers which demotivate them to excel in their studies. Even the students practice such behaviors and other higher caste students have a different friend circle excluding the Dalit students, which causes them to not want to go to school anymore. Teacher's discriminatory behavior and unequal treatment were seen as major reasons for Dalit girls dropping out of school. One of the Dalit women respondents added that, "Sometimes teachers also publicly humiliate Dalit girls for not being able to pay their extra fees of examination or other costs. Rather than talking to their parents privately about such issues, some teachers humiliate them in

front of other students”, which cause them to be ashamed and embarrassed in front of their classmates and not want to face them again.

Untouchability is still a practice that excludes Dalits from various fields. One of the respondents shared her own experience of her school days when they had a communal water jar in the school and she wasn’t allowed to touch the jar because she was from a lower caste. She further shared that she had to take along another friend with her so she could pour some water for her to drink. A respondent also provided another example of a teacher’s discrimination which happened only a year ago in the Terai part of Nepal. A school teacher refused to touch a Dalit student’s notebook to grade her assignment. The teacher instead told the student to keep the notebook on the floor so she wouldn’t have to receive the notebook from her hands directly. The Dalit women respondents emphasized that these kinds of discriminatory behaviors when happened at a young age, aren’t noticed as much by the Dalit girls. However, when they grow older they realize and recognize such acts and behaviors; it makes them feel inferior and weak resulting in a lack of motivation to continue their studies.

When hierarchy exists, pluralism persists and power is never held equally. In addition, one’s group identity, loyalty, and self-interest may cause it to be passed on within the group, and which is usually by birth (Berreman, 1967). The respondents mentioned that when a child is born in a household, they are already made aware of the caste system through various acts and behaviors. The higher caste children learn whatever they see in their homes and practice such acts in school as well. The sense of pluralism and power and its practice is passed down to the children from the household fields which determines their attitudes and behavior in regards to the caste hierarchy, reinforcing the unequal power and position in other fields such as in schools. The most common derogatory behavior faced by the Dalit students through their classmates was name callings. Most Dalit respondents said that their classmates often called them derogatory names associated with their caste which was often humiliating.

Such practices exist even in schools in urban areas. One respondent, who is a Dalit woman, gave a recent example of her daughter facing such behavior by her classmate in her school, which is a private school in an urban area. A day before a parents-teachers meeting at school, her daughter came home and requested her to not introduce herself with her actual surname but instead use her father's surname as he belonged to a different caste. When she asked her daughter for the reason behind it, her daughter said that her friends teased her saying that her caste belongs to a low caste group. The respondent added that,

“I was very disheartened because that is the caste I was born with and I wasn't used to introducing myself with my husband's caste, but I had to for the sake of my daughter”.

The concept of assimilation versus exclusion states that the ones without privilege try to overcome the discrimination through two forms, by 'emulation of high-status groups' and by 'exercising organized power' (Berreman, 1967). This case shows the practice of both means of power acquisition. This case shows the struggle of the Dalit family to assimilate into the system by emulating a high-status group and the struggle of exercising organized power through education with the constraints of hierarchy.

Berreman (1967) says that the dominant groups equate group interests with self-interest and encourage emulation rather than solidarity, meaning that the ones who emulate the higher castes lose their culture and background in doing so. When the ones without the power emulate, it perpetuates subordinate status and becomes harder to change or challenge to the system. He says that in a caste system, emulation is ineffective as long as the system persists because a social position is ascribed by birth which makes assimilation difficult (Berreman, 1967). Hence, even though the Dalit may try to emulate their way up into the hierarchy, their emulation still reinforces their status which further promotes more power relations rather than the solidarity of all caste groups and their respective cultures and backgrounds.

Many Dalit girls go through such incidents in the educational field, which affects their mindset and self-esteem. As Bourdieu's (1997) concept of habitus says that a person reinforces one's own and the surrounding beliefs by following the doxa of a certain field and in this case internalizing the surrounding belief within the education fields which affects the Dalit girls' own practices. The same respondent also added that "such incidents raise a lot of questions about yourself and your identity and if you don't have a positive support from your family or at least someone, which unfortunately many Dalit girls don't, and they fall into a trap of questioning themselves and they start accepting that they are inferior to others and feel weaker and lack the strength to stand up against such discrimination". Dalit girls lose confidence to talk to their non-Dalit friends and they feel like they have to stay inferior given their caste. Such incidents and discriminatory behaviors become especially hard for girls because the patriarchal norms in Nepal already make the females feel inferior to males and consider them as secondary citizens of the country. Belonging to a "lower" caste adds to the discrimination they face. As mentioned before, at such point, if they do not have the needed guidance and support, they opt for dropping out of school.

Another Dalit respondent also shared a similar personal experience in school, when her teacher while teaching about castes, provided a very derogatory example of her caste group which led to all of her classmates laughing at it. She added that the incident was very humiliating for her and for a very long time she wished that no one would ask for her full name or her father's name because she knew there would be a change in their behavior and attitudes if they realized about her caste.

Another very important point raised by two of the respondents was that some of the Nepali textbooks have very stereotypical and derogatory representations of the Dalit community. Showcasing Dalits as a low caste group who are only associated with lowly looked at jobs are also some very important points addressed by the respondents. These representations of the Dalit community can also have an impact

on the mindset of both Dalit and Non-Dalit students as they learn from various fields (particularly school in this case), that Dalits belong to a low caste group and other caste groups are superior to them, and they adopt such information by their habitus. Dalit students perceive such information which shapes their behaviors and attitudes accordingly. A respondent also added that many Dalit students, when they learn such things in school, feel inferior, do not have the confidence to talk to their higher caste classmates, which results in a lack of focus on studies and some even discontinue their education. As they don't have the strength or the power or position to stand up to other people or discriminatory teachings, they choose to stay silent which directly or indirectly reinforces the socio-cultural norms around it, as habitus is not only a product of structures and practices but also a reproducer of structures (Power, 1999). This also results in the perpetuation of doxa in the fields, such norms or knowledge around the Dalit community is unquestioned and followed and is expected to be silently accepted by the Dalit students.

A respondent added that such knowledge in textbooks adds to what non-Dalit children learn from their home or community about the Dalit community and the books teach the same things as well, which continues the cycle of caste-based discrimination. Very little research has been done on this particular topic; however, the respondents believed that it is a very important issue to be addressed and to bring reforms to school curriculums. Another respondent added that he has seen very minor changes in curriculums; however, no significant initiatives have been done on this area of topic. He added that the histories of Dalits are distorted in the textbooks and the contribution of Dalits in agriculture, music, arts, and many other important service sectors have never been highlighted in any school books. People from the Dalit community are very skillful and creative; however such positive aspects and contributions have little to no representation.

One of the respondents with experience from the research field expressed that the extent to which teachers have been trained in terms of inclusion is little known. There



hasn't been much detailed research on what happens inside a classroom which shows how such processes push certain groups out of the educational system. He added that it is essential for teachers to receive training on incorporating inclusion of all kinds inside the school.

Therefore, Dalit girls still face multiple discriminations within the education field through various factors. The struggle of Dalit families and girls to promote their way up into the hierarchy is still very much existent. However, the system itself controls and constrains their struggle resulting in overlapping barriers for Dalit girls in accessing education, ultimately leading to the reproduction of the practices which place Dalits in a subordinate position in the society.

#### **5.4 Awareness, Socio-cultural norms, household, and Dalit girls**

According to one of the respondents, Dalit girls and women face triple discrimination. They are economically weak, they face discrimination based on their gender and in addition also their caste. It is three-layered discrimination. When asked about the awareness level among Dalit parents about the value of education for both their sons and daughters, most respondents said that most Dalit parents have become very aware of the advantages of education and about the fact that girls should be provided with education as well. Even if the parents are illiterate themselves, because of many organizations that have been able to reach various parts of Nepal and spread the awareness of girl's education through various means, most Dalit parents have gained the understanding of providing education to their daughters. However, going back to the economic aspect of this discussion, although most parents are aware and wish to send their daughters to school, many are not able to do so, because of their poor economic condition.

A few respondents also added that most Dalit parents have become aware of the advantages of education for their daughters, there are, however, differences between educated and uneducated Dalit parents. Both sets of parents might understand that

they have to send their daughters to school, but many uneducated parents don't have enough knowledge about the levels of education, what levels of education are needed to have good career opportunities, and so on. Thus, they send their daughters to school until the 10<sup>th</sup> grade, and when the daughter doesn't get good jobs, they see little advantage of education and their investment and hence, the daughter does not continue with her higher studies.

According to Bourdieu, one of the forms in which cultural capital takes place is through a form of objectification which is a result of things such as educational qualification (Bourdieu, 1983). This could be seen as a lack of cultural capital in Dalit households and in the family field, which leads to insufficient knowledge about the advantages of different levels of education and results in the Dalit girls of the household facing the consequences such as discontinuation of their education, getting married early or getting into labor works at an early age. The respondents added that, on the other hand, if the Dalit parents are educated and hold sufficient cultural capital on the knowledge regarding educational levels and their value, they truly understand the importance of education and try to provide as much education to their daughters as they can. They understand that education is an important tool to fight discrimination and improve their status in society. Both set of parents want their daughters to study, so they can break the cycle of discrimination and not have to face what they have faced.

The respondents also discussed some still existent harmful socio-cultural norms and practices that affect the lives of Dalit girls and women and acts as a barrier for them concerning their education accessibility and experiences. In many rural areas of Nepal, mostly in province no.2 in Nepal, early marriage practices are still seen being practiced in a large number. According to most of the participants, arranged early marriage is reducing slowly, whereas, self-initiated or eloped early marriage is seen to be increasing. However, mostly among Madhesi/Terai Dalits, arranged early marriage is still very prevalent and along with it are the practices of the dowry

system. “Dowry refers to the money, property, or gifts that the bride’s parents or family give to the bridegroom and his family at the time of marriage” (Jha, 2016:216). Although Dowry was made illegal in Nepal’s Social Reform Act (1967), it is still practiced in Nepal in various forms (Fuller, 2020). When the daughter is married, the parents usually have to invest a huge amount to provide a dowry, because of which some Dalit households still have the perception that instead of wasting their investment in the daughter’s studies, they should save their limited resources to provide for when she gets married. Such practices hinder the girls’ access to education. Here, this could also be related to Bourdieu’s (1977) concept of cultural capital, and because of the lack of cultural capital of knowledge in Dalit households, about the harmful socio-cultural practices and wrong investment on daughters, the Dalit girls face limitations to acquire educational opportunities. These practices are prevalent among some non-Dalit caste groups as well in rural areas.

The respondents also added that when the girls get married early, very few continue with their education. Once they are married, they have to take responsibility for household chores and many also get pregnant early and the in-laws do not expect the daughter-in-law to continue her studies. Another reason for early marriage was also found to be if the girls were not doing well in school or failing classes, then some parents resort to marrying them early. Similarly, societal norms also plays an important role in early marriage, as a young girl having a boyfriend or if is close to a boy is not seen as a very good thing, and because the parents don’t want other people talking about their daughter and her character, they marry them off as a solution. One of the respondents, who is currently doing her undergraduate degree and belongs to the Dalit community, provided an example of her friend who lived not very far from her village. Her friend who studied with the respondent together in school and was very academically talented was recently married off. When she went and talked to their mother, she found out that their economic condition was extremely poor and their house was the size of a closet. Because of such poor conditions, the parents had

no option left but to marry their daughter, in hopes that at least their daughters will have a better place to live in.

Another respondent mentioned that a proper environment is very essential to create a good space for Dalit girls to pursue their education. She provided a very recent example of a Dalit girl, who came to Kathmandu to pursue higher studies in law. While she looked for a place to stay, the house owners agreed at first however, when they asked about her caste, they found out she was a Dalit girl and refused to rent out the room to her. She further added that in such situations, education becomes a secondary thing, as to pursue her education, she first needs to have a place to live and food to sustain herself. If she doesn't have a place to live, her education cannot go on without hindrance.

Berremans' concept of assimilation versus exclusion says that some groups enjoy privileges whereas others wish to overcome their denial in the society by seeking opportunity or through acquisition or exercising organized power such as education (Berremans, 1960). But the caste system is organized in a way that still gives decisive power to the dominant group. The dominant group can regard the lower castes as unassimilable in their social space in the larger society and hence the lower castes are excluded from their hope of moving up in the caste hierarchy by the exercise of power as that is their only feasible option. This gives the Dalit girls more disadvantage, as their struggle to assimilate up into the hierarchy is constantly constrained through various socio-cultural factors.

A Dalit woman respondent shared a very interesting experience that shows the power relation between the Dalits and the non-Dalits or the "higher" caste group. She shared that two years ago, while she was working in Nawalparasi, a district of Nepal, she found out about a Dalit girl who was doing great academically and was studying in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. She was doing better than her other classmates; however, her teachers visited her family and convinced them that they shouldn't send their daughter to

continue her education anymore. The reason they provided was that the girl has a lot of “boy-friends” and such thing will not be seen as a good thing for a girl by the society. The parents wanted their daughter to continue her education, but they couldn’t do anything, because it was the principal and the teachers themselves who convinced them. Mainly in rural areas, especially higher caste teachers or persons with authority figures are seen with the utmost respect and are seen superior to lower castes like Dalits. Eventually, she dropped out of school. While the respondent was there for her work, she tried to meet the girl, however, couldn’t. But one day the girl left a small note for her which read:

“I want to be like you and study and work in the future. Could you help me in any way?”

Seeing this, the respondent talked to her family and said that she would help the girl to send her back to school, but the parents didn’t agree. Later she realized that they didn’t want that because of the fear of the higher caste teachers and principals. She also realized that the teachers didn’t want the girl to continue her education because she was doing much better than her other classmates and they didn’t want a Dalit girl to excel. According to Berreman (1967), the caste system itself is organized in a way, which “promotes self-interest, for self-defense and self-regulation” (Berreman, 1967: 358). The system itself perpetuates inequality and is responsible for the behaviors and attitudes of all its members. Power relations become solidified and are perpetuated as the powerful caste groups remain so and the weaker groups have less power to confront the powerful ones and hence, remain weak. The respondent added that there are still Non-Dalits who have a social fear that the Dalits will educate themselves and excel in various fields and hence, acting on their ‘self-interest’ or ‘self-defense’, they try to maintain their power in the society. The respondent further said there are still many non-Dalit groups who are scared to let go of their power and privilege and hence work consciously or subconsciously to maintain the power by constraining Dalits of accessibility and opportunities. Therefore, this shows the Continuity of

Power and interdependence, as said by Berreman, where every caste group is dependent upon the other groups in the society but the ones at the top of the hierarchy always remain with decisive power and position (Berreman, 1967).

Although Dalit parents have become increasingly aware of the advantages and value of education for their daughters, multiple factors limit their capabilities to be able to send their daughters to school. As discussed earlier, the economic factor was seen as a major factor along with the socio-cultural norms around the caste system, which hinders the possibilities and opportunities for Dalit girls. The power relation between different caste groups, assigned by the system itself perpetuates an unequal position and privileges in different and uneven fields. Ultimately the ones without power, such as the Dalits, end up facing struggles because of the need for the system to maintain the hierarchy.

### **5.5 Self-internalization of Dalit girls and women**

Almost all Dalit respondents shared that they had faced discrimination based on their caste and gender multiple times through various actors. When our conversation revolved around the socio-cultural norms surrounding the caste system, many of them expressed how at various points in life most Dalit girls and women internalize such norms which are also a major barrier to their accomplishments in the field of education as well as in the future professional field. One of the Dalit respondents added that:

“When we face discriminations from almost all sectors, the community, schools, offices, we start to internalize such acts and start questioning ourselves rather than questioning the norms, which is very harmful.”

Another respondent further added that she had faced discriminatory behavior during her high school, by her classmate which caused great emotional and psychological stress for her. She added that when she was in high school, a non-Dalit male

classmate of hers made fun of her by asking “how much would she charge for a night”. This meant that because she was from a low caste and low caste Dalits are often associated with low meaning jobs and women are associated with jobs such as prostitution, he associated this and made the derogatory remark solely because she is a Dalit girl. She further expressed that, the incident was very hurtful, embarrassing and caused her to question herself and her identity. She started questioning her identity, and why was she born in that particular caste group. She couldn’t go to her school for two months after that incident because she didn’t have the courage to and she added that it was the most painful time of her life. Such internalization shapes the Dalit girls’ attitudes and behavior accordingly, which makes them accept their inferiority and weakness.

This could be related to Bourdieu’s concept of ‘Habitus and ‘doxa’. ‘Field’ is where ‘Habitus’ is created and reinforced. Each field has unique rules which are generated by the attributes, behavior, and communication way of the people. This set of unique rules is known as ‘doxa’. The role of doxa is to provide a sense of our role in a given field and control what can and cannot be done in a certain position (Walther, 2014). Doxa is internalized by people in a society to act acceptably in a particular field. How Dalit girls perceive themselves and their role is based on the socio-cultural norms and social construct of their identity based around the caste system. As Dalit girls face such attitudes and behaviors around them, they start accepting that they are supposed to be inferior to other higher caste and accept their social position in the society, and this particular case, accepting her position to be inferior to her higher caste classmates. Here, Habitus is created within the educational field through the constancy in the patterns of actions determined by a caste and gender of an individual. The social structure is also equally a determinant of such behaviors. The constant discriminatory behaviors based on an individual’s caste and gender affect and influence the Dalit girls’ perception and attitudes. As Dalit girls internalize the ‘Doxa’ created through the discriminatory patterns of actions, they perceive their

understanding of their individual and social position and they act along with the doxa created by the social norms and reproduce it sub-consciously (Bourdieu, 1977). When such actions and behaviors are constantly reinforced as true, through the habitus and doxa, a vicious cycle is created which affects the self-perception of Dalit girls.

Therefore, habitus created in different fields affect the perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors of the Dalit girls, and their acceptance of them as the inferior ones contributes to the production and reproduction of the habitus created. They internalize the doxa in the field which severely hampers their ability and status in society. Their habitus and internalization of doxa are seen in their practices which further reinforces the power of the dominant groups.

## **6. Conclusion**

This section will provide a summary of the empirical findings along with theoretical conclusions. In addition, recommendations for future policy amendments and necessary initiatives will also be briefly presented.

The findings showed that the Dalit community although they have come a far way, still face multiple discrimination and primarily because of their castes. The research questions tried to address the barriers on different levels, on an individual level, household level, within education and professional field, and the societal level.

The interviews helped in the understanding of different types of barriers on a different level, which all showed the system as the main perpetuator of unequal power relations. The interviewed Dalit women felt that Dalit girls and women face additional discrimination because of the patriarchal norms of the society. The socio-cultural norms around caste have a heavy influence on the opportunities, possibilities, and accessibility of resources and services for Dalit girls and women. The education field as well perpetuates the caste system through the teachers, higher caste students,



and other actors. The practices of reinforcing the power relations among different groups are seen on different levels being practiced by actors in various fields. Such practices were seen to limit the capabilities of Dalit households limiting their acquisition of power and privilege in society.

Bourdieu's theory of practice (1977) helped highlight the important role of different forms of capital to ensure proper access to education for Dalit girls as well as to see how Dalit girls internalize socio-cultural norms in different fields. Berreman's concept of caste (1967) helped to address the structural discrimination and inequalities perpetuated by the caste system and explore why such discrimination occurs and how it influences possibilities for Dalit girls. Chambers and Conway's livelihood approach (1992) helped in understanding the barriers created at the household level and the interconnections between the household capabilities, livelihood, and Dalit girls' educational attainment.

The intersection between economic factors, socio-cultural norms, and practices is a significant contributor to the continuity of the system. The socio-cultural norms have themselves limited the possibilities for the Dalit community to gain economic power and this, in turn, prevents accessibility and the cycle goes on. To build their status in society, the Dalits try to use various ways like gaining education, employment, and so on but the system constrains their already existing struggles. A positive aspect noted was that Dalit parents have become aware of providing education to their daughters and that many do not support early marriage anymore.

However, many barriers persist and improvements are yet to be made to provide the Dalit community with equal status in society. Limited in-depth researches have been done on the Dalit community and particularly Dalit women which provide limited data on many of their issues. For issues of Dalit women to be addressed and to be heard, there must be enough researches and statistics which will help focus on

particular issues. This thesis is a small effort to contribute to highlighting the issues of Dalit girls and provide further information and knowledge on them.

Through the findings of this paper and recommendations by the respondents, it is clear that the government of Nepal, although it has integrated caste-based allotment in its policies must still revise its policies and provisions with a particular focus on Dalit girls and women. A blanket approach to see all women with the same lens with an assumption that their problems are similar is not effective; hence an intersectional lens to revising the policies is essential. The scholarship provisions must also be revised to have a particular focus on students with dire need and not providing scholarships to all who belong to the marginalized groups. Particular scholarships should be provided to those even within the Dalit community, who have an extremely poor condition, so that more resources are allotted to such students, instead of giving everyone a very limited amount because they belong to the caste group. The education curriculum should be revised to promote inclusion and solidarity and not degrade any groups in any way. The teachers should also receive proper training to ensure appropriate teaching methods and an inclusive environment in school. Lastly, individual efforts are of great significance to challenge the hierarchy, and practices to respect and recognize solidarity in diversity should be promoted.

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**Annex:****Interview Guide:**

1. How long have you been associated with the organization?
2. What is your role in the organization?
3. What is the main tasks/focus of the organization? Why?
4. How does caste-based discrimination still affect the Dalit community in terms of accessing basic human rights?
5. Could you tell me about the historical process of Dalit community's access to education?
6. From then till now have there been significant changes in terms of Dalit community's access to education?
7. Does your organization have data about the dropout rates of Dalit girls from school? If so, would it be possible for me to get access to it?

**Economic aspect (Poverty and Livelihood):**

1. Does a family's economic status play an important role in the enrollments of their daughters in school?
2. How does poverty/inequality affect the educational opportunities/possibilities for Dalit girls?
3. What kind of scholarship provisions are available (by the government or other) at the present for Dalit girls?
4. How willing are Dalit parents to send their daughters to school without any scholarships? Is the willingness the same for their sons and daughters?

5. What kind of job opportunities is available for Dalit girls? What type of job are most Dalit girls usually involved in (after studies or if they dropout)?
6. What is the scenario for Dalit girls in terms of job opportunities?

**Educational System:**

1. Are there any caste-based differences within the context of school (by teachers and peers)? Do you think girls suffer more of these differences than the boys?
2. Does the education system in Nepal still hold caste hierarchy? How do Marginalized groups such as Dalit community experience such caste-based hierarchical practice within education system? How do girls suffer such discrimination or exclusion?
3. What are some of the major issues faced by (Dalit) girl students within the school system, which has affected their learning ability, interests and motivation or led to drop outs?

**Social aspect (societal norms):**

1. Does their caste and gender status create an obstacle for Dalit girls to receive education?
2. How has the Dalit community perceived value of education for girls in the past and the present?
3. How aware are Dalit parents about the advantages of education for girls?
4. What kind of expectations do Dalit parents have before sending their daughters to school? Do these expectations vary between sons and daughters?
5. To what extent do Dalit parents give priority to their daughter's education?

6. Does the Dalit parents' academic qualification play an important role in their daughters being sent to school?
7. Is there any cultural practice that affects Dalit girls' education? If yes what are they?
8. How has the social norm around Dalit community changed, specifically in terms of Dalit girls and their attainment of education?
  - What can be done to improve educational achievement in Dalit children, especially girls?
  - What type of policies exists in terms of access to education for Marginalized/Dalit girls?
  - In your view, are those policies enough? What changes do you think, we need in the policies?

**Additional Interview guide for Dalit women:**

1. How long have you been working in the organization?
2. What issues does the organization mostly focus on and why?
3. What is your academic qualification?
4. Growing up, did you face any discrimination because of your caste and gender from your friends, neighbors etc.?
5. Did your parents have the opportunity to get/complete their education?
6. What was your parents view on sending you to school?
7. Did they have the expectation for you to get a job in the future?
8. Did you have a brother? If yes, was your parent's decision to sending you both to school equal?
9. Do you think your parent's economic status played a role in that decision?
10. What were your parent's expectations from you and your sibling from your education? Was it the same for you and your brother?

11. Did you face any caste and gender based discrimination from your teachers or peers in School?
12. Was there was any caste and gender based factor within the school that demotivated you or your friends from continuing education?
13. Do you have any examples of Dalit girls who have faced exclusion from the educational system on the basis of caste and gender?
14. Do you have any examples of Dalit girls who have faced hindrances in education because of social norms or household norms?