



Girls Support Committees
Recommendations Report
August 1-3, 2016
Kathmandu
Hamro Palo

Recommendations from a Symposium of Girl Support Committee Members

held

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Hamro Palo

With support from:



Introduction

“To achieve success in any issue, one’s leadership is not enough; only through group’s leadership we can achieve success.”

A central level Symposium of Girl Support Committees (GSC) was held in Kathmandu on August 1-3, 2016. The Symposium was organized by Hamro Palo with support from MATCH International, Present Purpose Network and People in Need.

The event hosted 79 adolescent girls and 25 of their mentors and teachers from 29 GSCs from 13 Village Development Committees (VDC) in three districts: Sindhupalchok, Gorkha and Jumla. The speakers and guests included Ms. Mohna Ansari, Commissioner from National Human Rights Commission, Ms. Radha Poudel founder and president of Action Works Nepal, Ms. Meera Dhungana, president of FWLD (Forum for Women, Law and Development), Ms. Nani Maya Thapa, Executive Director of GMSP (Gramin Mahila Shrijanshil Pariwar) and Ms. Sarada Thapa, Senior Superintendent of Nepal Police Headquarter, Women Cell.

The objectives of the Symposium were to provide a common platform to the GSC members, mentors and their teachers to discuss issues they face in their communities and find possible solutions; to enhance GSCs’ capacity to address them, to strengthen the GSC network and create synergy between GSCs’ work; to plan future collaboration with local stakeholders such as women’s group, community leaders, female community health volunteers; to identify issues that hinder girls’ education, empowerment and involvement in the community and identify possible solutions; to encourage and inspire other girls and boys by sharing their work, lessons learnt and best practices.

The participants were invited to work in groups to identify the biggest challenges in various areas - protection, education, health, early marriage, livelihoods - and to develop a set of recommendations for organizations that work in these fields. These voices of grass roots adolescents and young women can strengthen future programming, policies and strategies of Hamro Palo and others who work with rural adolescent girls. Perhaps equally importantly, these dialogues served as an exercise in discussing issues and solutions, expressing girls’ united voice, and formulating their strategies, opinions and recommendations on a shared advocacy platform.

Below are summaries of discussions on various sectors and recommendations developed during the group work exercise that reflect the opinions of the Symposium participants.

Protection from violence

“I want to learn more about violence against women and children and the way to end it.”

Adolescents' security is affected by social structures and harmful traditions of which some lead to violence. Alcohol consumption in their communities contributes to adolescents' insecurity. In rural settings, many students feel unsafe when they travel alone and they often have to walk for 1-2 hours to reach their schools, and go to forests to collect firewood. Verbal, physical and sexual harassment in public spaces, such as taps and public transportation, is common and especially girls who have reached puberty are at risk. Additionally some communities practice menstrual restrictions whereby menstruating girls are excluded from certain spaces – this increases the risks of abuse, attack and harm from wildlife if a girl has to stay outside of her family home on her own.

The participants identified a number of forms of violence – violence against women and girls, violence by security providers, and sexual abuse. In the first category they specified witchcraft accusations, domestic violence, and harmful menstrual restrictions. In the second category the adolescent girls rated unequal and unfair laws, political pressures, and inadequate police performance. In the category of sexual abuse the girls listed rape, trafficking, marital rape, sexual harassment (for example perpetrated by policemen, drivers, conductors, adolescent boys), and sexual violence in school perpetrated by students and teachers. Some girls cope with the harassment in public spaces by avoiding walking alone and traveling in groups instead and recommend this to their peers; however it's important to note that this strategy does not remove the source of insecurity.

After the earthquake the situation is especially difficult for many adolescents and reconstruction and recovery is very much anticipated in affected communities. Many schools don't have sufficient and adequate, gender segregated toilets with locks, which may lead to absences of girl students or dropping out of school altogether. The temporary shelters people still live in since the earthquakes are unsafe and lack privacy to change clothes and menstrual materials.

Recommendations from participants:

- **Equal law and justice to be applied to everyone and security forces need to be accountable** – there must be no caste gender, age or any other form of discrimination in accessing justice services.
- **Engagement of appropriate agencies and stakeholders** (police, mothers' groups) in prevention and response to violence. Reaching **adolescents, illiterate and vulnerable groups** through these programs.
- **Boys and men need to be reached** with violence prevention programs, awareness campaigns, media campaigns.
- **Awareness raising activities**, drama, discussions, rallies, should be organized in all communities. Campaigns in the media – radio, Facebook – should also be conducted.
- **Free education for girls**. Educated girls are safer from violence and have better access to resources. While education is free in theory, some fees still apply which prevent some girls from attending school.

- **Low cost hostels** for students who live far from schools. They would not only improve attendance and access to education, but also would help students who are at risk of harassment on their way to school.
- Provision of **appropriate safe, private, gender segregated toilets with locks in schools** would also help with attendance and decrease the level of insecurity for girl students.
- Living in poverty and lack of financial stability contributes to insecurity and vulnerability. There has to be support for **single women and marginalized groups** in livelihoods and economic development.
- **Adequate survivors' support** from state agencies: providing legal, psycho social and medical support and protection of their rights.
- **State agencies should not be politicized** as it affects their impartiality, accessibility for all citizens including survivors, and transparency.
- Lack of privacy when changing clothes and washing menstrual hygiene materials is one of the major sources of insecurity. **Gender segregated, private and safe bathing spaces** in each community would help women and girls feel safe.
- **Education of communities on harmful practices** like *chaupadi* (menstrual restriction) which create vulnerabilities for women and girls.
- **Strengthening laws implementation** regarding violence and harmful practices. While most harmful practices and forms of violence are already illegal, there is not enough law implementation.
- Alcohol consumption can increase insecurity for women and girls. **Reduce tobacco and alcohol consumption**, include punishments for users.

Education

"We had one friend in our school that dropped out in class 6 for 3 years due to the poor economic status and her parents' pressure. She participated in the workshop but did not come back to school after it was finished. We went to her house and talked to her parents and they sent her back to school. Today she is studying in class 7."

Symposium participants agree that education is an important area that needs attention – educated girls and boys are healthier, safer and have better prospects for prosperous futures. One of the challenges many children and adolescents in their communities face is gender discrimination in access to education when the parents prioritize sons' schooling over that of daughters'. Poverty is one of the important factors that can limit access to education. Other factors that can lead to dropping out of school include early marriage, lack of parents' support and their lack of awareness on the importance of education, alcohol use by the adolescents, and discrimination in school. There are also issues that affect the quality of education: its politicization and lack of competent and qualified teachers.

In the post-earthquake context, access to education was further hampered by lack of reconstructed school buildings, inadequate – not gender segregated – school toilets, and insufficient equipment, for example lack of science labs or libraries at schools. There are also geographical constraints – in many areas landslides caused unpassable or unsafe roads, which prevented students from attending school.

Recommendations from participants:

- Increase awareness to **reduce gender discrimination in access to education**. Work with communities to ensure equality between sons and daughters. Ensure daughters have as much time to study as sons and are not disproportionately burdened with household chores.
- **Scholarships for economically disadvantaged students** - many children and adolescents drop out of school because their families can't afford continuing their education. Poverty should not be an obstacle to getting education.
- Because of social norms that prioritize sons' education over daughters' many girls are at a disadvantaged position. Any **fees for girls' education should be waived** so it is free and accessible.
- Geographical constraints limit some students' access to school. **Low cost hostels** for students who live far from schools would allow them to have equal access.
- NGOs and political parties should advocate for **mobilizing the budget allocated for children** in District Development Committee (DDC) to improve quality of education, infrastructure, safety, health and protection from violence.
- Cooperation and collaboration should be strengthened between GSCs and teachers to maintain **study friendly environment at school**. It's essential that students in their classrooms are healthy, safe and encouraged to learn.

Health

"If the society is educated, only then the whole country can secure the health of citizens, remove superstitious belief and minimize harmful social practices."

Many communities struggle with lack of health facilities with trained health professionals and that directly affects women, girls, boys and men. Access to health services is even more limited after the earthquake, because many health posts were destroyed or damaged. Political instability also affects availability of health services.

Early marriage remains a key concern as a factor contributing to high maternal and infant mortality and other problems related to reproductive health such as uterine prolapse and obstetric fistula. Malnutrition, poor hygiene and alcohol and tobacco use were also identified as health related concerns.

Recommendations from participants:

- Infrastructure remains a major concern when it comes to health services. **Reconstruction of health posts** and staffing them with competent health workers would improve access to health services.
- **Awareness raising activities** (drama, posters, pamphlets) on health related issues - hygiene, sanitation, alcohol and tobacco consumption, early marriage - should be conducted in communities. There should be **strong coordination for health awareness** between teachers, education supporters, leaders, clubs and organizations, political representatives, NGOs.

- Drug use affects communities, their livelihoods, security and health. There should be a **strong coordination** between mothers' groups, youth clubs, child clubs and GSC to minimize drug consumption.
- Young people often have better access to health related information than their parents through their health classes. Adolescents should **take the lead on changing health related habits** and promote healthy norms and behaviours in families, communities and schools.

Proposed key messages

- Everyone should use toilets.
- Wash your hands with soap and water after using toilet and before eating.
- Spread awareness in society.
- Community can be healthier if one is healthy.
- Start change yourself from today.

Livelihoods

"I want to learn more about overcoming poverty and the ways to make people educated in the places where there is illiteracy."

The earthquake hampered livelihoods in all affected communities through loss of farming tools, livestock, and damaged irrigation systems. In the monsoon season, heavy rains and subsequent landslides further exacerbate risks to the land and livelihood opportunities (as well as health and lives of those affected). There is a number of interrelated issues that further adversely affect livelihoods: lack of education, lack of transportation, lack of access to market, lack of agricultural materials, skills and technologies, scarcity of raw materials. Occupational discrimination also adds to unemployment and is one of the driving factors of poverty.

Recommendations from participants:

- Lack of jobs remains a challenge in many communities. To reduce poverty, state and NGOs should **provide employment opportunities** in rural areas.
- Due to social norms and harmful traditions, women are especially disadvantaged in access to jobs. **Empowerment of women** should be a collective effort of organizations and communities, so they have equal opportunities in the job market.
- Limited employment opportunities are exacerbated by lack of skills. **Vocational training in rural areas** to improve skills should be conducted by state and non-state actors.
- Lack of access to markets hampers livelihoods. **Increasing the availability of transportation** will advance mobility and accessibility and improve livelihoods as a result.
- Lack of materials prevents livelihoods development in many rural areas. **Agricultural raw materials should be provided** to farmers to improve their productivity and help increase their earnings.

Early marriage

“We should work together so no one would engage in early marriage.”

Early marriage is worryingly prevalent in many rural communities and the Symposium participants identified it as one of the major concerns. Among its drivers are lack of education, poverty, harmful traditions, child labour, gender discrimination, and pressure from families. Its consequences are equally concerning and include poor health situation of young mothers and their children – maternal and infant mortality, as well as psychological problems, heavy work burden for child and adolescent brides. Young brides often end up trapped in the cycle of domestic violence with little access to resources and limited capability to reach out for help. They often drop out of school and remain economically dependent as their employment opportunities are limited by low education level.

Recommendations from participants:

- **Awareness programs on impacts of early marriage** (drama, seminar, workshop) in communities where the prevalence of early marriage is high.
- In many communities social norms prevent girls from speaking up and advocating for their rights. **Confidence building programs for adolescent girls** can improve their advocacy skills and help them exercise their rights.
- While the legal age of marriage in Nepal is 20, law enforcement and implementation often lag behind. **Implementation of existing law** is necessary in tackling the early marriage crisis.
- One of the drivers of child marriage is low social status of women and girls – some families don’t perceive their daughters as assets, but see them as burdens instead. To address this, **women’s leadership skills development and promoting gender equality** should be conducted in communities.
- Certain norms and traditions also can contribute to high rate of early marriage, eg dowry (also illegal) or belief that marrying a daughter off early will benefit the spiritual path of parents and grandparents. These **harmful traditions should be challenged** within communities.
- Domestic violence is both a cause and a consequence of early marriage. Domestic violence at home sometimes forces adolescent girls to elope, while on the other hand child brides are at higher risk of violence and have little says and power in their husbands’ households. **Domestic violence prevention and response** has to be in place to address these vulnerabilities for girls at risk and girl brides.
- In some cases early marriage occurs under peer pressure. **Promoting healthy relationships** between adolescents and their negotiation skills can help navigate social pressures and avoid engaging in harmful practices.
- Local level authorities need to prioritize early marriage prevention and response. There should be **budget allocated on VDC level** for early marriage prevention.
- To help families exit the circle of poverty, which can be a driving factor of early marriage, more livelihoods opportunities are needed. **Vocational trainings** should be provided to vulnerable and people living in poverty.
- Educated girls are less likely to get married and **education in rural areas needs to be prioritized**. Scholarships for economically disadvantaged students, promotion of



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children's rights, trainings on children's development and creating a learning friendly environment in schools can improve girl and boy students' performance, attendance and participation.