

RELIGION AND GENDER

Roles of Hindu Customs and Practices in Shaping Gender Norms



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FOREWORD

Gender equality is not just one of Nepal's pressing human rights needs- it is also the cornerstone of a just, inclusive, and sustainable future. Despite efforts of the government and civil society, gender disparities remain high in Nepal. Women and girls have low status in education, resource access, participation in public life, and decision-making. Discriminatory practices are often rooted in male-dominated cultural norms and various religious beliefs and commands, although no one knows for certain whether these beliefs and commands have evolved from religious doctrines/ mandates. These beliefs are often used to justify inhuman practices, including gender-based violence against women and girls, esp. the women in rural areas and from poorer backgrounds. The causes of gender inequality and violence are diverse, but most of these results are due to the socially assigned lower status of women, reinforced by power hierarchies. The traditional patriarchal mindset of society is said to be a systematic barrier to gender equality.

This study particularly examines participants' understanding and experience to identify the influence of Hindu culture and religion in shaping and institutionalising gender norms in Nepal, particularly in the research area. The study explores the social power dynamics between men and women as sanctioned by cultural and religious norms. While equality between men and women was stipulated in the oldest texts of Hinduism, the "Vedas", later texts like the "*Manu Smriti*" justified male dominance. Despite cultural shifts and socio-economic developments over centuries, unjust gender norms persisted and became entrenched. The study delves into the reasons behind the strong resistance to changing these norms, although they are opposed by international and Nepali law, and many people in the communities are wishing transformation.

The study, which focuses on the experiences of women, men, and religious actors, serves as a valuable resource for anyone interested in understanding and fostering positive changes in gender equality in the context of Nepal. UMN hopes that the insights and recommendations presented will contribute to informed decision-making for civil society, government actors and other stake holders. UMN is happy to share the stories and findings with a wider community of practitioners and researchers, in the hopes that they will contribute to the common goal of promoting gender equality.

With this, I would like to take this opportunity to express our gratitude to Sagar Gaudel, Sabu Tamang, Kabita Gurung and the entire research team for the initiation and the communities for their participation in the study.

Dhana Lama
Executive Director
United Mission to Nepal

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Research Team

ACRONYM

CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
FWLD	Forum for Women Law and Development
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
GoN	Government of Nepal
KII	Key Informant Interview
MoH	Ministry of Health
NDHS	National Demographic Health Survey
NGOs	Non-governmental organisations
RM	Rural Municipality
UN	United Nation
VAWG	Violence Against Women and Girls
WHO	World Health Organisation
WOREC	Women's Rehabilitation Centre

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	INTRODUCTION	1
2	OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY	2
3	LITERATURE REVIEW	5
	3.1 Gender inequality and gender-based violence	5
	3.2 Gender based violence and gender inequality in Nepal	5
	3.3 Gender schema theory	6
	3.4 Gender power theory	7
	3.5 Culture	7
	3.6 Religion	9
4	THE METHODOLOGY OF THIS STUDY	11
	4.1 Study Site	11
	4.2 Sampling Frame and Size/Identifying Interviewees	11
	4.3 Interview process	12
	4.4 Analysis	12
	4.5 Ethics	12
	4.6 Limitations of the study	12
	4.7 Conceptual Framework	13
5	FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION	14
	5.1 Basic information about the respondents	14
	5.2 Understanding Gender-based violence and its prevalence	16
	5.3 Expected gender roles between men and women at the household and community levels	19
	5.4 Power relationships between men and women on the household level and community levels.	20
	5.5 The interplay between culture and religion in shaping gender norms	21
	5.2.1 The interplay between culture and religion	21
	5.5.2 Culture and religion on shaping gender norms	23
	5.6 Practices of rewards and punishment for adhering to or deviating from gender roles, done	26
	5.7 Effectiveness of gender equality-related interventions by both government and civil society actors	28
6	CONCLUSION	30
	6.1 Areas of other research	33
7	RECOMMENDATIONS	34
8	REFERENCES	36

1. INTRODUCTION

Gender-based Violence (GBV¹) is a major human rights violation and a public health problem. Likewise, gender inequality belongs among the most prevalent forms of social inequality (Inglehart and Norris, 2003) and exists all over the world, with different effects in different regions and contexts. The United Nations defines violence against women as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life (United Nations. Declaration on the elimination of violence against women, New York: UN, 1993²). Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG) is also a major public health problem. A report published by the World Health Organisation (WHO) – 2021 indicates that globally about 1 in 3 women worldwide have been subjected to either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime, (WHO, 2021). The term “GBV” will hereafter be used interchangeably with the term “violence against women and girls” although it encompasses violence against men as well.

Gender equality is a global issue, particularly in development politics and human rights discourse. In the last three decades, international actors have increasingly challenged gender-based violence. Along with the global feminist movement, the United Nations (UN) and numerous non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have developed strategies intended to end violence against women and girls. Most importantly these developments reinforce both the government and non-governmental actors to recognize women’s rights as human rights. The adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) by the United Nations General Assembly in 1979 had already brought women’s issues into legal and public discourse. However, the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing particularly drew international attention to women’s rights issues. The Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action which was joined by 189 states unanimously constituted a significant turn for collective action for gender equality, development, and peace for women in the interest of all humanity. Likewise, Asia-Pacific countries adopted the declarations to advance gender equality and women’s empowerment. The declarations, both Beijing and the Asia Pacific, recognised women as key contributors and vital agents in combating poverty and inequalities and called upon governments to ensure inclusive social protection systems, public services, and infrastructure³.

This international agenda has had a significant impact on national politics, policies, and development priorities in East and South Asia. Equality between women and men, for instance, is recognised in the constitutions of most South Asian countries like India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Nepal. All these countries prohibit gender-based discrimination. Although the Maldives do not explicitly mention gender equality in their constitution, the country has a Gender Equality Act that aims to address gender-based discrimination and disparities. All these countries have introduced some affirmative actions to promote gender equality (Ali, 2010). The State of Nepal has ratified and endorsed several

¹ The term “gender-based violence” will hereafter be used interchangeably with the term “violence against women and girls” although theoretically, it could encompass violence against men as well.

² Asia-Pacific countries adopt declaration to advance gender equality and women’s empowerment | UN Women – Headquarters

³ Asia-Pacific countries adopt declaration to advance gender equality and women’s empowerment | UN Women – Headquarters

binding international treaties related to gender equality such as CEDAW, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and the ILO Convention 111 on Discrimination (Employment and Occupation). These Global and regional initiatives on gender equality have also been reflected in development aid priorities. In Nepal, for example, addressing social issues is one of the key areas of most bilateral and multi-lateral donors. Nevertheless, gender inequality and gender-based violence continue to be one of the most notable human rights violations in Nepali society. Women in Nepal are affected by GBV and gender discrimination regardless of their age group, marital status, geographical differences, employment, or economic status (FWLD-2021). The pervasiveness of the problem is evident in the increasing number of reported cases of GBV in the country, and Nepal's ranking as 110th out of 162 countries in terms of gender inequality⁴.

In the last decade, ending GBV, gender inequality and promoting women's economic empowerment have become development priorities for the Government of Nepal (GoN). This commitment is reflected in the Constitution of Nepal 2015 and various other legislative acts like the Gender and Inclusion Policy of 2013, the National Women Commission Act 2017, the Domestic Violence (Offence and Punishment) Act, the Sexual Harassment at the Workplace Prevention Act 2015, and the National Action Plan on UN Security Council Resolutions 1325 and 1820 as well as the National Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Policy 2021. These are the key policy measures on gender equality and women's empowerment in Nepal. Likewise, Nepal's 15th Plan Approach Paper (2019-2024) aims to institutionalise gender-responsive development initiatives through sectoral programs and guidelines.

These policy instruments have made some progressive changes in increasing women's participation in different walks of life. However, there are several challenges to promoting gender equality and women empowerment in Nepal. Women who get involved in politics and social activities, continue to face several constraints including access to financing, mobility restrictions, gender-biased practices, household responsibilities, particularly care for children and elderly, and most importantly, GBV including intimate partner violence.

In recent years, the GoN has made intensified efforts to combat gender discrimination by developing progressive legal instruments and setting up the institutional set up for monitoring mechanisms. Combating GBV is one of the key priority areas of the Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in Nepal. Millions of dollars were spent on promoting gender equality in Nepal, but actual changes in the lives of women and girls are very little, particularly of those who are socio-economically weak, from excluded sections of the society and living in rural parts of the country. These constraints and challenges are perpetuated by poor implementation of laws and policies (UN Women, 2023) and Nepal's wider social context of patriarchy and traditional gender-discriminatory norms.

Culture and gender relations are rooted in religious concerns thus religion's constitutive contribution to power relations within society is best understood by viewing religion itself as a system of power. (Woodhead, 2012). While in this research we talk of Hindu tradition, as it affects women, however, the reality is women are affected by culture cutting across all religions. (Mukhopadhyay, 1995). More than 80% of Nepali people follow the Hindu religion,

⁴ <http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/gender-inequality-index-gii>

the entire society is dominated by the Hindu culture which has a strong influence from the Hindu religion. However, very few efforts are made in Nepal to understand the nexus between the Hindu culture, religion, and gender-based discrimination. Understanding the relations between culture, religion, and gender requires recognising that both culture and religion serve to represent, embody, and distribute power within society. Additionally, these two systems of power distribution are interconnected (Kelvingrove and Havlicek, 2015).

Several scholars have highlighted the importance of unpacking the local context for designing effective interventions in combating GBV. This research particularly focuses on examining the role of Hindu culture and religion in setting up and institutionalising gender norms in Nepal, particularly in the location of this research. Multi-stakeholders' perceptions of these norms, causes of the rigidity of these norms, and the way forward for challenging gender-discriminatory norms will be explored in the research.



2 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The aim of the research is to explore and understand the role of Hindu religion and culture in shaping gender discriminatory norms and practices, particularly in the context of the research area, and also to understand the local perspectives on how these norms and practices can be challenged.

The following are the research objectives and questions for the study:

Objective 1: To identify features of Hindu culture and -religion that shape discriminatory gender norms.

Research questions under objective 1:

- What are the different expected gender roles of men and women on the household level?
- What are the power relationships between men and women at the household and community levels?
- What is the interplay between culture and religion in shaping gender norms.?

Objective 2: To identify the reward and punishment system for compliance and non-compliance with the gender norms (why also)

Research questions under objective 2:

- What are the rewards and punishment practices for men (sons and husbands) and how are they justified?
- What are the rewards and punishment practices for women (daughters and wives) and how are they justified?
- How effective are these practices in cases of deviance or resistance?

3 LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Gender inequality and gender-based violence

Sex: The term 'sex' refers to the biological differences between men and women. "Sex refers to the physical and biological characteristics that distinguish males and females. These include chromosomes, hormone levels, and reproductive/sexual anatomy. Sex is generally assigned at birth and is typically categorised as male or female" (WHO, 2022).

Gender: The term "gender" refers to the socially and culturally constructed distinctions between males and females, specifically, the roles, behaviours, and responsibilities that society assigns to men and women. "Gender refers to the socially constructed characteristics of women, men, girls, and boys. This includes norms, roles, relationships, and behaviours associated with being male or female in a given society. Gender is fluid and can change over time" (UN Women, 2023).

Gender equality/inequality: Gender inequalities can be defined as culturally and socially created differences between men and women when both sexes do not have the same share in the decision-making and wealth of a society (Ridgeway, 2009).

3.2 Gender-based violence and gender inequality in Nepal

The prevalence and situation of gender-based violence are determined by various factors, notably culture, and religion. GBV levels in different countries correlate not just with economic growth and legal-institutional reforms, but also with cultural aspects, particularly religiosity. The cross-sectional differences in support for gender equality vary even between societies at similar levels of development and depend upon the degree of religiosity and the type of cultural and religious values (Woodhead, 2012). GBV is deeply rooted in Nepali society. Women face many inequalities and violence. The causes are diverse, but most of these results are due to socially assigned lower positions of women that is fuelled by the patriarchal mindset of the society where GBV is taken as a normative phenomenon. The continued persistence of gender-based violence stems from power structures weighed heavily in favour of men. Most gender-based violence against women is inextricably linked to male power, privilege, and control. Culture and traditions, which are often reflected in national laws, only help to perpetuate the idea of male dominance.

A study on GBV conducted in selected rural districts of Nepal by UNFPA in 2012 showed that forty-eight percent of women reported that they had experienced violence at some point of their lives. The status of women and girls is very low in terms of education, access, and control over resources, participation in public life, decision-making, and stake in policy-making both in formal and informal settings. The discriminatory practices against women and girls are primarily cemented by male-dominated cultural norms and religious beliefs and commands, although no one knows for certain whether these beliefs and commands are truly rooted in religion or not. Non the less, in most social settings, inhumane practices are often justified by referring to so-called cultural and religious references. Social norms and practices referenced from the Hindu religion and cultural practices in Nepal are perpetuating GBV including intimate partner violence. The condition of women and girls is even worse in rural parts of the country including in the research area of this study. The Demographic Health Survey 2022 of the GoN revealed that twenty-three percent of women

aged 15–49 have experienced physical violence since age 15, including 11% who experienced physical violence often or sometimes in the 12 months preceding the survey. The survey also revealed that the percentage of women who have experienced physical violence since age 15 has remained at 22%–23%. However, there has been a slight increase over time in the percentage of women who experienced physical violence in the last 12 months, from 9% in 2011 and 2016 to 11% in 2022 (MoHP: 2022). Among the seven provinces of Nepal, the percentage of women who experienced physical violence often in the 12 months is 2nd highest percentage in the Lumbini Province. The research site is one of the 12 districts⁵ of Lumbini Province.

A theoretical account of the relations between religion and gender requires an acknowledgment of the distribution of power within society, plus an account of how these two systems of power distribution may relate to one another. The term 'religion' is often used interchangeably with culture. Culture and gender relations are rooted in religious concerns. Religion is the basis for many of the cultural values that prescribe what women are and how they should behave, how they should relate to each other, and what is permissible or impermissible for women to do (Mukhopadhyay, 1995). Religion focuses on spirituality and belief systems, while culture is a broader term that includes religion as one of its components. Culture derives or gets influences from religion, but also goes beyond religion as it is rooted in the material, social and economic life and is therefore affected by the local and folk traditions. In this research we specifically explore the impact of Hindu tradition as it affects women, however, the reality is that women are affected by culture cutting across religion.

Classical Hinduism or Hindu ideology is neither monolithic or uniform, nor is it static since it has been changing over time. There is also a differentiation between textual and contextual Hinduism, namely, the ideological and the empirical ground. The multiplicity of customs and social practices are common characteristics of Hinduism (Wadley 1977; Allen 1982; Mukhopadhyay and Seymour 1994; Dube, 1997). There are no differences among development planners, scholars, and activists regarding the importance of gender equality and women's empowerment for the economic, social, and democratic advancement of society. However, this progress is highly influenced by institutional regulations, as well as cultural and traditional practices, often guided by culture and religion. Since religion and culture influence each other, religious beliefs and social norms continuously impact one another (Ridgeway, 2004).

3.3 Gender schema theory

The gender schema theory was introduced by psychologist Sandra Lipsitz Bem in 1981. It asserted that children learn about male and female roles from the society and culture in which they live. Both boys and girls adjust their behaviour to align with the gender norms that they observe in their family and community from the earliest stages of their psychological and social development.

Gender schemata have an impact not only on how people process information but also on the attitudes and beliefs that direct "gender-appropriate" behaviour. A child who lives in a very traditional culture might believe that a woman's role is in the caring and raising of

⁵ The first level of the country subdivision of Nepal is the provinces. Each province is further subdivided into "districts", each district into urban and rural "municipalities", and each of those municipalities into wards.

children, while a man's role is in work and industry. Likewise, a girl raised in a traditional culture might believe that the only path available to her as a woman is to get married and raise kids. By contrast, a girl raised in a more progressive culture might pursue a career, avoid having children, or decide not to get married.

The theory believes that gender schemata are limiting for both men and women, and for society as a whole. Raising children free from these stereotypes and limitations would lead to greater freedom and fewer restrictions on free will⁶.

3.4 Gender power theory

Gender as an emergent feature of social situations; both as an outcome of and a rationale for the various social arrangements and as a means of legitimating one of the most fundamental divisions of society (West and Zimmerman, 1987). Contributed and developed by several scholars including Robert Connell, the theory of gender and power is a social structural theory that closely examines sexual inequality, gender, and power imbalance. According to the theory of gender and power, three major social structures characterises the gendered relationships between men and women: the sexual division of labour, the sexual division of power, and the structure of society.

Both gender roles and gender display focus on behavioural aspects of being a woman and a man. The notion of gender as a role obscures the work that is involved in producing gender in everyday activities, while the notion of gender as a display relegates it to the periphery of interactions (West and Zimmerman, 1987). Facing criticism that "doing gender" merely reinforces gender conformity, West later realised its incompleteness and the necessity for changing its propositions (Deutsch, 2007). Gender and power theory explores how gender intersects with power dynamics within social, political, economic, and cultural realms. It stresses the significance of comprehending how gender shapes and is shaped by power relations, hierarchies, and inequities. The theory views gender as a social structural phenomenon, not merely individual characteristics, and highlights the importance of understanding gender alongside power imbalances, and intersectionality. The gender power theory holds that in every society, the power is in the hands of the men and each society is divided on a gender basis into the dominant group of all men and the dependent and dominated group of all women. The theory demands and advocates the liberation of women from male dominance, which is unnatural, undemocratic, and harmful to society. The main thrust of the theory is that the present system of patriarchy needs to be replaced by a society based on real and comprehensive equality between men and women. The domination of men over women has been working as a system of all-round and justifying exploitation, oppression, and suppression of women who constitute half of the world's population and perform nearly 2/3 of the work hours. Women must have the right to be equal partners in the exercise of power in society. The two classes of men and women must be equal partners in the exercise of power in each society.

3.5 Culture

Culture is the bigger social system of which religion is just one of the many subsets of and not the other way around. Culture is the body of knowledge that is acquired by people through

⁶ Gender Schema Theory | SpringerLink

years of being together in one society, while religion is the belief system directed towards the supreme deity, and yet this is something that may or may not be accepted by each person in a culture. Two individuals may have the same culture and yet practice different religious practices.

Culture, in particular customary law, of the society mostly governs or at least has a strong influence on all social structures, behaviours, and practices. Cultures are not fixed or immutable. They are constantly constructed and reconstructed to lend significance to social practices. No culture stands still. Contexts to 'fix' the meanings of social entities take place all the time, leading to changes in social practices (Mukhopadhyay, 1995). Thus, culture should not be understood as a static concept but has a dynamic and flexible frame. According to Giroux, 'culture is not seen as monolithic or unchanging, but as a site of multiple and heterogeneous borders where different histories, languages, experiences and voices intermingle amidst diverse relations of power and privilege'. There have been several theories suggesting the connection of the two such as religion being the centre of culture. However, we can never deny the fact that certain cultures can also be disconnected from any form of religion in a society. In this research, culture has been used as a broader term where religion is a strong component of it.

Customary law, a part of culture, is more powerful than formal law as people in power, mostly men, believe that they are benefiting from it. For instance, gender-based discrimination including the "dowry system" is illegal by Nepali law, however, the practice of dowry is very common in the southern belt of Nepal including the research area which is adjacent to India. In these areas, the rich people celebrate weddings as a lavish function, and giving dowry to the family of the groom is said to show their higher social status. But this is a huge financial liability for poor families with daughters. This has fuelled the practice of perceiving daughters as a burden and marrying off daughters as young as possible, leading to child marriages, another human rights violation that affects girls more than boys. The older the girl, the more the dowry. As girls age, it becomes increasingly challenging to find a suitable groom as many boys marry early. Consequently, when someone is ready, he often demands higher dowries. The dowry system can also be attributed to early withdrawal of girls from school and unfortunately even the abortion of female fetuses.

Dilemmas concerning gender and culture have implications for both development theory and practice because all development practitioners are in some way intervening in processes of social transformation (Tomka, 2006). They will somehow work with men and women, and the approaches they choose will be critical. Thus, what development practitioners believe to be the nature of gender relations in a specific cultural context, and how they view "culture" in general, has practical consequences. Their understanding of gender and culture can further entrench gender inequality, or it can demonstrate the possibility that such inequalities are open to challenge (Mukhopadhyay, 1995). It is crucial for every individual including academicians, political and community leaders, government people, and most importantly development practitioners use culture as a way to open up intractable areas of gender relations, and not regard culture as a dead-end, which prevents us from working towards more equitable gender relations (Chanana, 2001).

Role differences between sexes can be seen as manifestations of values and norms of a culture and social contract. In fact, researchers have revealed dimensions of cultural

specificity that reflect these gender differences stated by culture. For example, the masculinity versus femininity dimension reflects the degree by which gender roles are interchangeable in a society. As the Dutch social psychologist, Geert Hofstede noted, there can be significant differences in the socialisation of boys and girls in relation to aggression: "A society is considered a masculine one if the gender emotional roles differ clearly: men should be authoritarian, harsh and focused on material success, while women should be modest, gentle and concerned with quality of life. A society is considered a feminine one if the gender emotional roles overlap: both men and women must prove modesty, gentleness, and concern for the quality of life" (Hofstede et al., 2012, as cited in Neculaesei, 2015). The assignment of social roles based on gender is a consequence of cultural-religious interpretations and historical and environmental factors (Hofstede et al., 2012, as cited in Neculaesei, 2015).

3.6 Religion

Religion is a system of beliefs, rituals, and practices that relate to spiritual, supernatural, or divine occurrences, often involving the worship of a deity or multiple deities. Religion has a huge influence on gender inequality and norms as it is deeply rooted in people's experiences and influences the socioeconomic and political direction of societies (Stump, 2008). In many cases, it has catalysed the implementation of norms that seek to oppress women and give supremacy to men. The role of religion is, obviously, complex and it varies across time and space. These differences are primarily due to cultural legacies, historical development, geographical locations, and, last but not least, the religious norms that predominate in society (Inglehart and Norris, 2003). However, Hinduism, unlike Christianity, Judaism, or Islam, lacks a single authoritative text; rather, it has thousands of relevant texts, produced over a span of 3,000 years (Orit, 2015). Within the geographic sphere of Nepal, Hinduism assumes varied forms and often appears more diversified than unified. Thus, any particular practice or belief may be contradicted elsewhere or denied by some Hindus. Hindu religious texts present diverse and conflicting views on the position of women, ranging from the feminine leadership in the form of the highest goddesses, to limiting their role to those of an obedient daughter, housewife, and mother (Orit, Afshan, and Rachel 2015). Though it is debatable, mostly in practice women are taken as subordinate to men. The complex structure of the culture and socio-economic factors guided by the male supremacy culture prevalent in Nepali societies deprive girls and women of basic human rights. Individuals, communities, and even formal institutions' attitudes towards women and girls are shaped by the so-called male-oriented powerful culture leading to different treatment of men and women based on their sex (West and Zimmerman, 1987).

In Hindu religion, men are given authority over women and thus a woman's role becomes subordinate. People were taught only about these aspects. However, several instances in the Hindu religion recognize men and women as equal. The religion even places high respect for women, but these aspects are rarely brought into the light of practice and discussions. Male supremacy that is embedded in Hindu culture has prevented women from getting equal opportunities as men and has defined how a woman should behave. Women are made to believe that a man is the head of the house and that they should always be submissive to him. In most cases, the role of a woman is that of a helper to her husband and a follower of a man's (husband) leadership.

The key notions in the sociology of religion are religion itself, faith, religious practices, communal belonging, and others have basically different meanings and implications under different socio-cultural circumstances (Tomka, 2006). It is not constant. Religious and cultural practices are evolving and changing with time.

The sociology of gender and religion first emerged in the 1970s and 1980s with feminist criticism of religion (especially in its fundamentalist variants) on one hand and studies of issues such as women's subordinacy (Hussain, 2010) and goddess worship (Risman, 2004; Neitz 2003) on the other hand.

Ideological differences also influence the view of the Hindu woman. For instance, Altekar (1978) and Mukherjee (1978) provide several instances of women's centrality in rituals, family life, and education and contend that the Hindu woman enjoyed a position of equality in the early Vedic age. Altekar infers that deterioration in women's position comes much later. Several scholars (Hussain, 2010) contest this position. Moreover, in spite of such differences, there is a general agreement among these scholars on some points. For instance, images of Hindu women have varied over time, and it is generally agreed that their position has changed for the worse from the Vedic to the classical period of Hinduism and thereafter. Second, even though there are textual references to women occupying the public space of education and the birth of a scholarly daughter being desired (King, 1995), the patriarchal constraints begin to impinge on women's lives in the later Vedic period (Risman, 2004). The disagreement among scholars is rather about the time when the decline begins. And again, religion adapts to local culture and thus there are likely to be variations in how socio-cultural practices impact the access of women and girls to education.

4 THE METHODOLOGY OF THIS STUDY

Qualitative approaches better explain the phenomenon, meaning, and description of events (Silvermann, 2000). The overall design of this study is empirical and qualitative. The study aims to explore the role of customs and practices coming from the Hindu religion in shaping gender norms. This study comprises the experience of various types of respondents, people from local communities who are benefiting and people who are suffering from those discriminatory gender norms. Among the respondents are also religious leaders (priests and teachers) and traditional community leaders who mostly are enforcing customary laws. The more specific approach of phenomenology was chosen as it allows for an in-depth exploration of an individual's subjective experiences and perception which is crucial for understanding complex issues. Through in-depth interviews, this study seeks to capture the rich narratives and perspectives of respondents.

4.1 Study site

The study was conducted in Nawalparasi District, located in the Lumbini Province of Nepal. Studies indicate a high incidence of GBV in the southern districts of Lumbini Province, including the study site. This has been explicitly stated in the recent report published by the Ministry of Health and Population, Nepal (MOHP, 2022). The prevalence of GBV in the study area is attributed to the strong dominance of patriarchal structures and the low level of socio-economic status of women and girls which is reinforced by local customs. In addition to this, a significant Muslim population resides in the district, and a recent study shows even higher incidences of GBV within Muslim communities compared to neighbouring Hindu communities (MOHP, 2022). Indeed, customary laws hold a strong influence on the study site. Most of the community people including men, religious leaders, and even the majority of women and girls perceive talking about GBV issues as challenging their practices. Many national laws and policies hold the local government responsible for combating GBV and raising awareness about harmful traditional practices against women and girls such as child marriage or paying dowry. However, the local government authorities including elected representatives hardly dare to go against local customs as they depend on the support and votes of the locals particularly local elites to maintain their positions. Furthermore, there is insufficient awareness and knowledge about the negative impact of GBV on the individual, family, community, and society levels. Another primary reason for conducting this study in Nawalparasi was that UMN works in the district and findings and insights gained from the study can directly inform UMN's work in the area.

4.2 Sampling frame and size/identifying interviewees

This study is based on primary information and follows a qualitative design to explore how Hindu customs and practices have their influence in shaping gender norms. The data were collected from different key stakeholders including, community-based women leaders, women activists, and men. Men who are engaged in challenging gender-based discrimination in their respective communities were also interviewed. Likewise, traditional healers, local priests, and religious leaders at local and national levels were included. Hindu theologians and academicians, journalists, and Chairpersons of Rural Municipality were also part of the research. The data collection began through purposive and snowball sampling. As the data collection process progressed, the point of data saturation was reached, and the

sample was then finalised. A total of 22 Key Informant Interviews (KII) and 8 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted.

4.3 Interview process

The study used qualitative data collection methods, like in-depth interviews and FGDs to gather detailed information. Considering the sensitivity of the issues, the in-depth interviews were conducted by qualified enumerators. The researcher led or provided close support in most of the FGD discussions. Adopting a gender-friendly research approach, female members conducted KII with community-level female respondents. Five FGDs were women-only, while two were men-only. Women enumerators led the discussions in women only FGDs. The interview guide was prepared and oriented to enumerators before starting the interviews.

4.4 Analysis

Before reviewing secondary data, necessary keywords were identified to efficiently filter relevant documents on Hindu customs, religion and culture. Authentic documents were assessed for the review such as scholarly works, journal articles, reports from organisations focused on gender equality and discussion papers.

Interviews were conducted based on the set guideline. All the data was analysed in light of answering the research questions. The analysis was done using qualitative thematic analysis. The data was processed to identify main themes, indexed, and sorted following these themes. Then, the main themes and sub-themes were identified and summarised. The meaning of the main themes and sub-themes were analysed in light of the research questions. The concepts of Gender Power Theory and Gender Schema Theory have been adopted as the framework of the analysis. The intertwined relationship between Hindu customs and practices plays a pivotal role in shaping gender norms and attitudes. Analysing these norms involves unpacking power dynamics, the reward and punishment systems, and the relationship between men and women. The study also questions the origins of these norms, their beneficiaries, and their significance. Additionally, how these norms became institutionalised and evolved into strict rules over time was also explored. There were some contradictions, particularly in the view the three scholars held then we shared their opinions and sought their final agreement before we formulated the conclusion of the study.

4.5 Ethics

As the issue is sensitive, the study team carefully adhered to research ethics. Before recording interviews, respondents' consent was sought. All respondents agreed to the use of their information for publication with the condition of remaining anonymous and confidential. Hence, their identity has been protected in this study.

4.6 Limitations of the study

The study acknowledges the limitations of the research, as there is diversity in denominations of Hinduism and there are no specific main scriptures. Thus, opinions from Hindu priests, Hindu priests, academicians, and community leaders may not apply equally across denominations. Gathering or disaggregating information according to different Hindu denominations was not feasible due to time, capacity, and logistic constraints. Additionally, this study assumes that power structures and socialisation processes are key factors

perpetuating GBV. Moreover, there may be other influential aspects too in different settings and contexts. Some old literatures are also used due to limited study of the topics.

4.7 Conceptual framework

This study departs from the idea that gender-based violence is the issue of human rights and everyone is entitled to live a free, secure, and dignified life. Examining the root causes of gender-based violence, it reveals how societal norms perpetuate women's submissive roles. Gender-based violence is deeply rooted in culture and is reinforced by strict customary laws that uphold male-centric power dynamics both at home and in the community. Women's lack of agency in decision-making stems from a fear of repercussions, contrasting with the impunity often granted to men.

Further, this study is based on the idea that Hindu religious texts have historically been interpreted to Prioritise men's interests, gradually institutionalising discriminatory cultural practices. The process is continuing thereby perpetuating discriminatory gender norms, and practices and fostering gender-based violence as a normative phenomenon.

Conceptual framework for this study

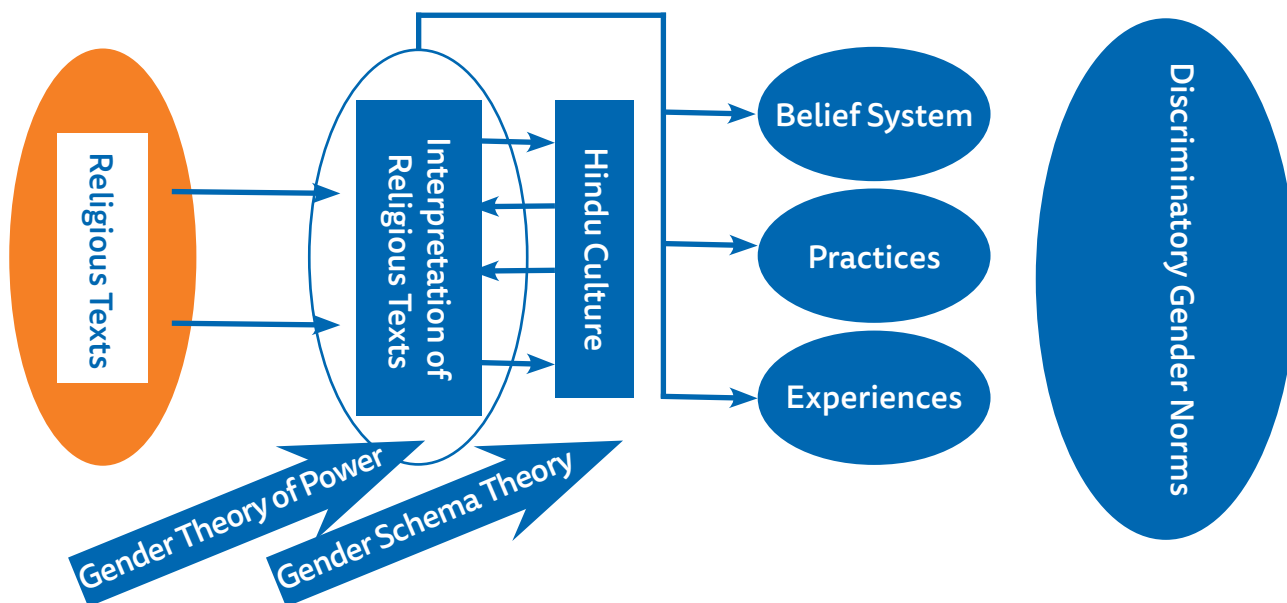


Figure 1: Conceptual framework for this study

5 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

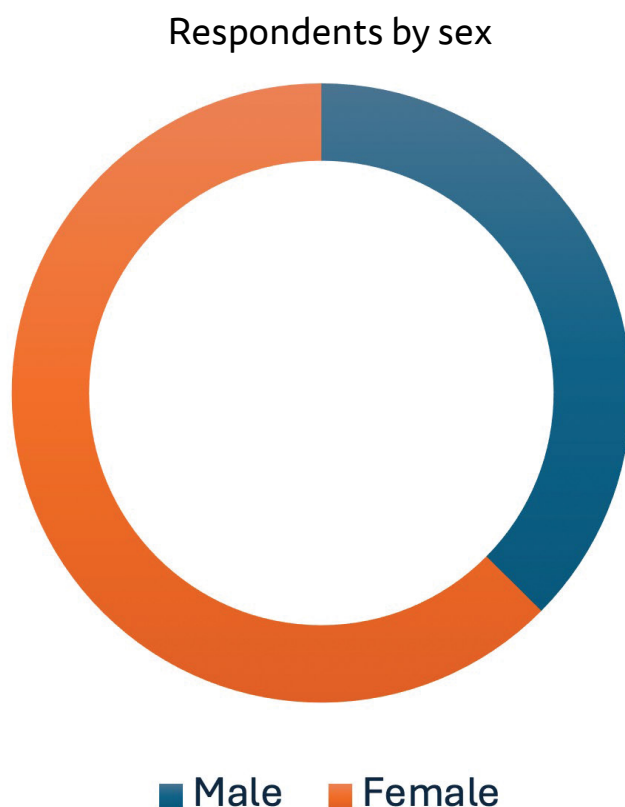
The section below outlines the participants' perception and understanding of GBV and the influence of Hindu customs and practices on shaping discriminatory gender norms. The section contains subheadings that were derived as themes in the data analysis.

The first theme discusses an understanding of GBV and its prevalence. The second theme explores expected gender roles for both men and women at the household and community levels. The third theme examines the interplay between culture and religion in shaping gender norms. The fourth theme delves into practices of rewards and punishment for adhering to or deviating from gender roles, along with their justifications. The fifth theme evaluates the strictness of these practices in cases of deviance or resistance.

Lastly, the section discusses the effectiveness of gender equality-related interventions by both government and civil society actors. The conceptual framework draws from gender power theory and gender schema theories, forming the basis of the entire analysis.

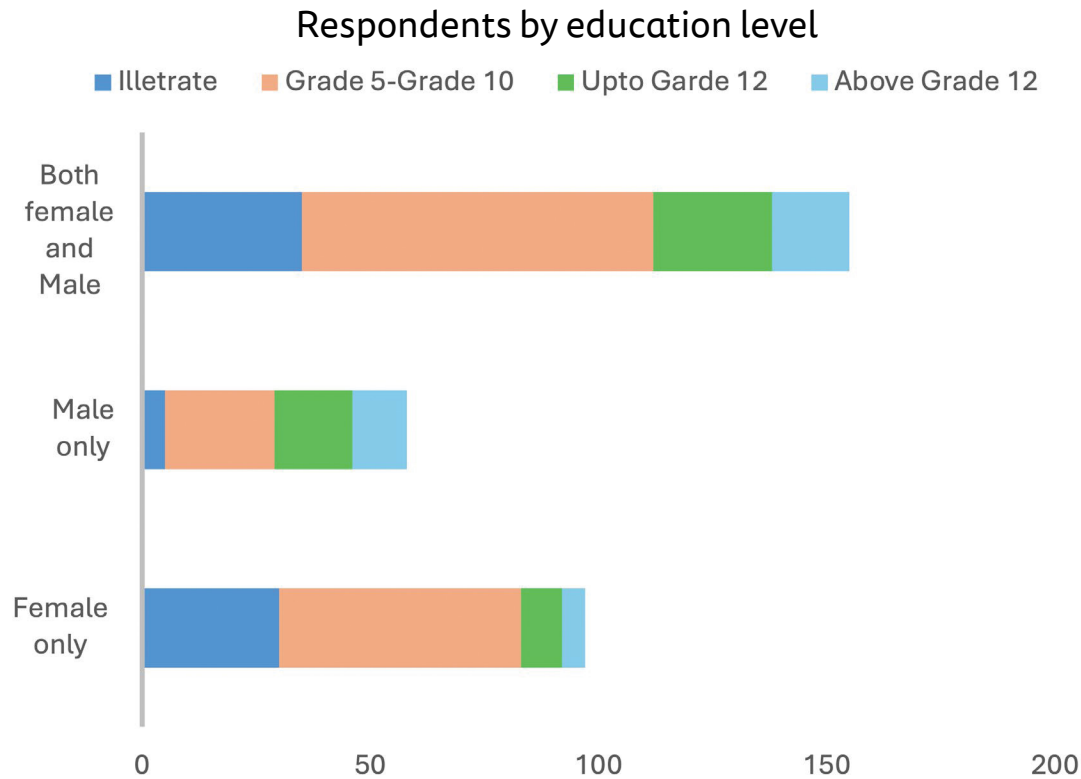
5.1 Basic information about the respondents

Out of 155 surveyed persons, 63% were female and 37% were male. Among the female respondents, 84% were married and 16% were unmarried. Whereas around 94% of males were married and 6% were unmarried.

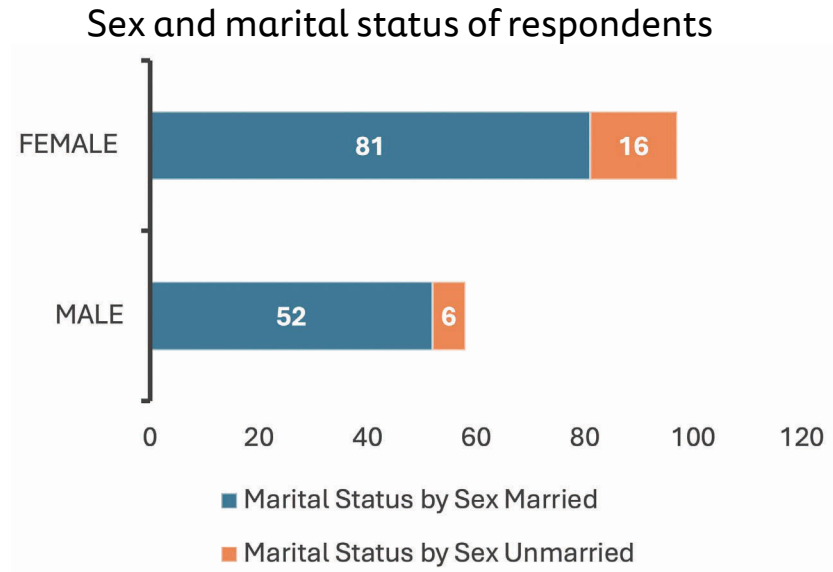


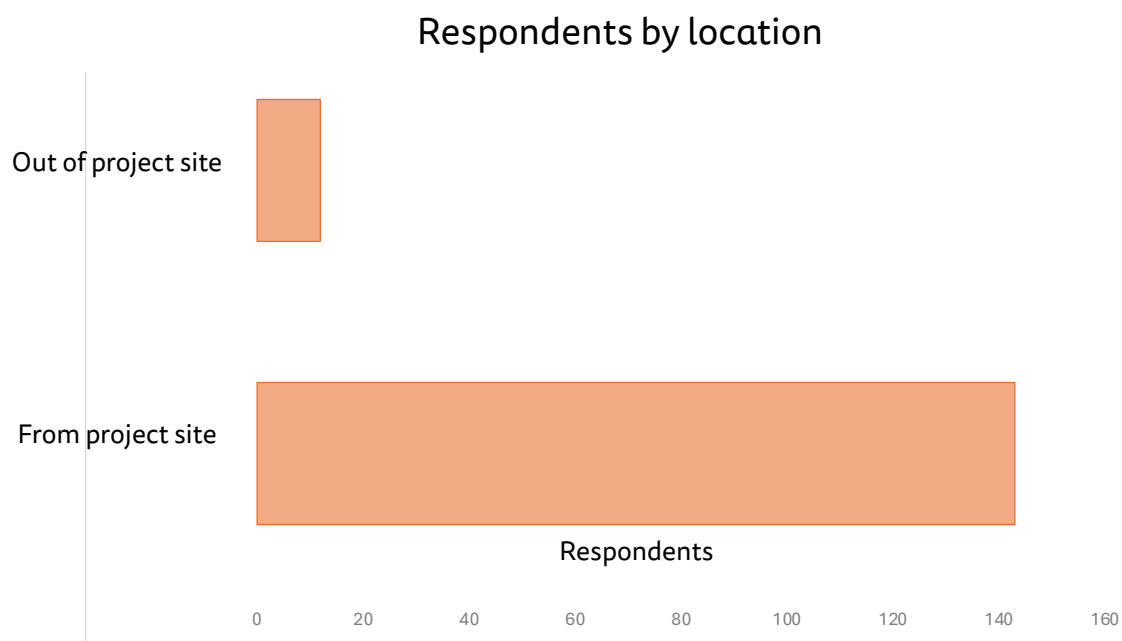
In terms of ethnicity, 30% were from various ethnic groups, 11% were from the so-called Dalit community, 13% were from so-called upper caste Hill origin, and the rest were from Madhesi communities.

Education-wise, 23% were literate only; 50% attended Grade 5 to Grade 10; 17% attended Grade 10 to Grade 12; and 10% had received education above Grade 12, including PhDs.



Geographically, 86% of the respondents were from the research area, Nawalparasi District, and 14% were from the national level. Among those surveyed at the project sites, 74% were either born or grew up in the project site while 26% migrated with their families or moved to the project site after marriage. For those who settled later, the minimum and maximum years of living in the project site ranged from 2 to 21 years.





5.2 Understanding Gender-based violence and its prevalence

The perception of understanding Gender Based Violence varies significantly among participants. Notably, 80% of community group members⁷ tend to equate GBV with physical violence. However, about 15% include both physical and psychosocial violence in their understanding of GBV, while 5% have a broader perspective encompassing various forms of violence.

GBV is deeply rooted in culture and upheld by strict customary laws, often found unrecognised even by survivors of violence, a gender activist shared during the consultation. Married women who organised in self-help groups on the project site unanimously shared that they speak up against physical violence but except for physical violence, they generally adhere to traditional practices. This includes seeking permission to go out of their settlement and even being involved in social activities. They generally avoid interactions with unfamiliar men. Such adherence is enforced not only by husbands but also by other family members, including the mother-in-law. Non-physical forms of violence are seldom discussed within families or the community. However, for physical violence, all participants both men and women recognised men as the perpetrators and women as the survivors. All participants agreed that the most common violence is wife beating by husbands under the influence of alcohol. Awareness of gender issues and women organising into self-help groups have been credited with contributing to a decrease in GBV, particularly physical violence, although participants did not provide concrete evidence to support this claim. The interchangeable use of “physical violence” and “GBV” remains common.

⁷ Women organised in community-based self-help groups.

I live in a joint family. My sister-in-law completed her Grade 12 education before marriage. Upon joining our household, community members invited her to participate in various social activities. Sometimes local authorities from the Rural Municipality⁸ also invited her to engage in community-level social structures, and she was happy to be involved in such activities. However, I witnessed a conflict between my brother-in-law and my sister-in-law due to his disapproval of her involvement in such activities. Although he did not resort to physical violence, disagreements over her engagement outside the home occurred almost daily. As an elder, I too advised her to limit her social engagement and remain at home. None of the family members who knew her situation realised that this is violence. Unfortunately, I later learned that she began taking medication for depression. After two years of marriage, she initiated divorce proceedings and eventually divorced my brother-in-law. Subsequently, he married a girl who had just completed Grade 9⁹.

Perceptions of gender-based violence (GBV) among male respondents were largely similar. Over 65% equated GBV with physical violence, while only 26% extended their definition of GBV by psychological harm. Only 9% of the men shared the broader perspective of international definitions, acknowledging that GBV encompasses physical, psychological, and sexual violence, along with threats, coercion, and arbitrary deprivation of liberty. They also shared that different forms of violence are there in the community against women and girls due to unequal status. Around 93% of the male respondents viewed that a man who loves his wife would not harm her without reason, justifying discriminatory practices as beneficial for women.

A man as a household head, we need to make sure that all household-level practices are going smoothly and well. For instance, children are taken good care of, all family members reach home on time, etc¹⁰

Male respondents further added that women who perform their household chores well, do not have any risks. Only around 7% opposed these discriminatory practices, arguing that confining women to household roles is detrimental.

Community leaders, both men and women, shared similar views to those expressed by women organised in self-help groups. They highlighted increased discussions and some changes at the wider community level. However, female community leaders held that those changes in men's and in-laws' practices are not yet noticeable, despite some individuals' public claims to not discriminate. One female leader constated: *In reality, only a handful of people in her community have truly changed their behaviours.* In some instances, respondents made contradicting statements. A male community leader postulated: *I do not interfere with my wife's decision¹¹.* However, when asked if he would accept his wife staying in the district headquarters for one night without informing him and the family, he answered, no, it is not a good practice for ensuring peace in a family. Another male respondent from the community

⁸ Rural Municipality (RM) is a sub-unit of a district and was established to replace the existing village development committees (VDCs). The Ministry of Federal Affairs and Local Development dissolved the VDCs and announced the establishment of these new local bodies. Currently, there are 481 rural municipalities in Nepal. These RMs play a crucial role in local governance, with responsibilities such as collecting taxes, managing budgets, and providing essential services to their communities.

⁹ A woman organised in a community-based self-help group in the study area.

¹⁰ A man from the study area

¹¹ A man, community leader, from the study area

gave the following reason why his wife cannot make independent decisions about where she goes: I should know all circumstances as I need to ensure her safety and well-being, as he cannot be certain of her safety if she is alone¹².

Religious leaders largely shared similar views to the women from self-help groups. Seventy-five percent from this group understood GBV solely as physical violence. 13% of the religious leaders also consider discrimination between son and daughter as a form of GBV along with physical violence, while 12% include physical violence, discrimination between son and daughter, and restriction of mobility as well as GBV. However, all agreed in their claim that the GBV prevalence in the research site is low. One religious leader entirely downplayed the issue of GBV:

There are a handful of men who beat their wives but most of such men either are alcoholic or have health issues. Some incidents occur due to mistakes on the wife's part, emphasising the need for balanced consideration. Simply blaming men is not the only solution¹³.

Even government officials, such as Rural Municipality Chair have a perception of gender that aligns closely with the general population instead of adopting the definition of GBV in international and Nepali laws and policies.

I do not believe GBV is a significant issue in our area. While some practices still don't treat women equally to men, many prioritise women highly¹⁴.

Women and men activists, along with community development workers, held different views from the majority of community-based women and men, community and religious leaders. They had a robust understanding of various forms of GBV and perceived its prevalence as extremely high in the community. They observed that women are expected to strictly adhere to traditional gender norms, primarily being focused on household chores and obeying the directives of husbands and in-laws. Deviating from these leads to various forms of violence, including physical, psychosocial, financial, etc. Furthermore, these respondents noted a clear preference for sons, resulting in significant discrimination between boys and girls, especially in education. Despite some families not discriminating, the general trend favours boys' education even in cases of financial constraints. People do not want to send their daughters outside of the home for higher education, however for sons, they mostly they feel proud of sending them outside for higher education. Some of the community members both men and women, religious leaders, and social activists, at least aligned with the observations of activists and community development workers.

If a woman conforms to her husband's and in-laws' wishes, she is deemed acceptable. However, if she engages in social activities without permission, moves freely outside the community, or speaks out against discrimination within the household, she faces various forms of violence¹⁵.

¹² A man from the study area

¹³ A religious leader from the study area

¹⁴ A RM official from the study area

¹⁵ A man, activist from the study area

5.3 Expected gender roles between men and women at the household and community levels.

Most participants, including women from self-help groups, community leaders, and men agreed that their belief system is based on male supremacy, where men are seen as carriers of the family name, legacy and heritage, and therefore are more valued than women. Women are viewed as supporters of the men. Participants attributed the lower status of women to cultural norms such as the practice of girls moving to their husband's house upon marriage. These beliefs directly shape expected gender roles, with women being primarily responsible for household chores, and men for outside work and family protection. Participants believed that these practices institutionalised specialised gender roles, with daughters being expected to assist in the kitchen and learn household chores from their mothers and grandmothers to become good wives and mothers. They also noted that boys are taught to be good husbands and fathers. Almost all the participants, more than 70% of women and 90% of men believe that gender roles are predetermined by birth, undermining the influence of socialisation. Almost all the participants viewed that families' honour and prestige largely depended on the daughters' fulfilments of their gender roles. The burden to uphold their children's good behaviour falls on the mothers. Women are generally not allowed to go far from home to earn money. One female respondent provided an example that illustrates how this intersects with mobility and resource generation in the community.

I completed Grade 12. There was a job opportunity in a civil society organisation, but the office was 26 km away from my home. My husband and in-laws did not allow me to take the job. My husband does not work and spends most of his free time playing carrom. We struggle to manage money to send our children to school¹⁶.

All participants unanimously agreed that men are predestined to be breadwinners and are responsible for managing finances and protecting the family. Leadership roles are expected from male members both within and outside the household. Leadership within the household is associated with deciding household-level matters such as which school children should go to, providing cash to other family members, etc. Women are viewed as having to support men and create a conducive environment for tasks assigned to men. They are generally viewed as responsible for household chores and caring for the family members' emotional and physical well-being. The participants also shared that some changes have been observed as some women have started earning money and assuming leadership roles within and outside the household. However, the tragedy is that even if a woman earns money and participates in decision-making, she is still expected to manage household chores solely, leading to overburdening. It was also shared by almost all women and 60% of men that these men's reluctance to engage in household chores discourages women from seeking proactive and leading roles. A female community leader shared the following example:

¹⁶ A woman organised in one self-help group.

As the manager at a local cooperative, I face the expectation to handle household chores. While my husband doesn't work, he is still not happy assisting in the kitchen and caring for our daughter. To deal with this, I began bringing my daughter to work with me when she was just 11 months old. At times, I decided to quit my job to focus solely on household responsibilities¹⁷.

5.4 Power relationships between men and women on the household level and community levels.

The power dynamics between men and women, both at home and in the community, is predominantly male-centric. Participants unanimously agreed that key decisions, such as land transactions, education choices for children as it requires paying cash, and community matters, are primarily made by men. Around 30% of participants including both men and women shared that men generally consult women for such decisions but ultimately the decision rests with men, having a better judgment of what is best for the family.

Four female community leaders, however, viewed that women's passivity in decision-making stems from a lack of confidence and fear of repercussions if decisions go wrong but no same level of repercussions to the men if decisions go wrong. *Unless we create a conducive environment at home, no matter if men ask women to decide, they will not make decisions.* These community leaders further highlighted that women generally have limited access to and control over financial resources, which further hinders their involvement in decision-making processes. Women activists emphasised that while women may have access to some household resources, they lack control over them. This situation is prevalent throughout society. A women's rights activist said:

One woman wearing a gold chain cannot even exchange it without her husband's permission, while a man can freely sell his finger ring, even while playing cards¹⁸.

All the participants agreed that male outmigration creates opportunities for women in leadership roles. Women in households with absent men have gained authority and control over resources, assuming some traditional male roles. These women also have an increased access and control over household resources, participating in key decision-making processes, placing them in relatively higher positions compared to other women. However, three women from community self-help groups shared that increased accessibility of cell phones somehow hindered women in making decisions or reduced autonomy to make decisions on their own while men were participating in out migration. Most women in this community shared that for household decisions, they have to consult their husbands living abroad via mobile phones (decisions like selling goats, or buying new clothes). But all three women described it as a way to prevent conflict and disagreement when their husbands returned.

¹⁷ A community leader from the study area.

¹⁸ A woman activist from the study area.

5.5 The interplay between culture and religion in shaping gender norms.

5.5.1 The interplay between culture and religion

Almost all the community-based women and men, 60% of the community leaders and traditional healers share a similar interpretation of culture, aligning it closely with religion. While some variations exist within culture, they generally remain within the framework of religious principles. In Nepal, the terms “religion” and “culture” are often used interchangeably among common people, who believe that culture facilitates the expression of religious values. For most participants, Hindu religion and culture are closely intertwined, with cultural practices largely shaped by religious beliefs. Disregarding cultural norms is seen as violating religious principles. However, around 40% of the community leaders acknowledge that while culture serves as a means to enact religious teachings, it is also a social construct influenced by religion. They recognize culture as broader in scope than religion and acknowledge that within the same religious community, different cultural practices may exist. Cultural norms are often adapted according to contextual needs, as evidenced by the experience shared by a female respondent who was born in a different location but has since settled in the study area.

In my parents' area, over 98% of the population are Hindu, but they have slightly different customs compared to here. Here, in my area, when a father-in-law passes away, both the son and daughter-in-law must abstain from contact with others, including work and caring for children and livestock, for 13 days. However, in my parents' area, daughters-in-law are allowed to continue their usual activities, only needing to eat self-prepared meals. Despite sharing the same religion and caste, there are variations in practice¹⁹.

Community members unanimously agreed that such practices are designed to facilitate household chores. In rural areas, homes are scattered, and other family members may not be available to care for livestock and children. However, in the study site, homes are clustered together on flat land, allowing for easier coordination of tasks. This highlights the adaptive nature of culture. If a religion prescribes certain practices, why do they vary in different locations within the same religious framework? This underscores the notion that culture evolves according to local requirements, however mostly prioritising the convenience of men.

Approximately 16% of the interviewed community leaders, traditional healers, and local religious leaders shared similar views on the relationship between culture and religion. They believed that religion plays a significant role in shaping cultural values, norms, and practices, guiding individual and community interactions, which are essential for societal functioning. Despite potential differences in cultural practices, they shared that they need to follow the norms of their community for the sake of peace and harmony.

In contrast, 24% of social leaders, women and men journalists, community development workers, and activists working in the field of promoting gender equality shared different views. They held that culture and religion mutually influence each other. Culture is mostly founded on religious beliefs that are misconstrued. They emphasised instances of women's

¹⁹ A woman journalist from the study area.

empowerment in Hindu scriptures like the Vedas, which are often overlooked in discussions, values, and practices instead, while the male-dominated nature of society is reinforced by referring to other religious texts. According to a community leader, several Hindu religious texts are interpreted in a way to establish the supremacy of males²⁰.

Even among Hindus, cultural practices vary among different caste groups, indicating that if these practices stem from religious commands and values, they should apply equally to all Hindu²¹.

National-level religious scholars gave slightly different views compared to the community-based religious leaders and priests. According to them, in Hinduism, culture serves as a means to practice the religion. When religious practices become cultural norms, people tend to accept and follow them regardless of their personal beliefs. Many people follow cultural practices simply not to be cast out or boycotted by society.

These leaders unanimously acknowledged the complex and dynamic relationship between culture and religion and also highlighted that the influence of culture and religion on each other varies depending on the historical context and the religious diversity within society. In societies with diverse religious backgrounds and people from different locations, the influence of a particular religion on culture is relatively minimal. However, in societies where the majority adheres to one religion and has limited exposure to other religions and societies, the influence of that religion on culture tends to be more pronounced. A national level Hindu religious leader said:

The culture of Hindu people living in the upper mountain areas of Nepal has a nominal influence on the Hindu religion only. Instead, their culture is highly influenced by Buddhist and Tibetan cultures. Their religious practices differ significantly from those of the majority Hindus²².

Women's rights activists and other respondents working on gender equality argued that Hindu culture, traditionally male-centric, is often perceived as static and used by men to justify male supremacy over women. With increased awareness of human rights and gender inequality in Nepal, a minority of society has begun to criticize the traditional gender roles imposed by Hinduism. Human rights and gender rights activists shared that religion evolved in patriarchal societies, where men manipulated religious texts to maintain their superior status in society. They assert that Hinduism was originally women-focused, or at least not male-dominated, but men have distorted its doctrines throughout history for their benefit. National-level religious leaders at least partly acknowledged this perspective, adding that many cultural practices that developed centuries ago may no longer be relevant today. In urban areas, people have adapted their practices to suit contemporary contexts, which is generally accepted within their circle.

When someone's close relative dies in a Brahmin family, they abstain from consuming salt and meat for 3 to 13 days, 13 for the closest relative. However, this practice is nearly obsolete in urban areas²³.

²⁰ A gender activist from the study area.

²¹ A women community leader from the study area.

²² National-level Hindu religious leader.

²³ A man activist from the study area.

The relationship between religion and gender equality is a complex one. Religion significantly influences cultural, social, economic, and political norms in many parts of the world. Moreover, interpretations of religious texts, often by male authorities, have long shaped gender roles and the status of women and men in society. This calls for academic and theological scrutiny. While local-level religious leaders partly agree with national-level counterparts that Hindu culture Prioritises women's safety, there is a call from national-level religious leaders and gender activists to raise awareness about making people aware of how culture evolves with time and its non-static features. According to them, it is also imperative to have a discussion/discourse on examining cultural practices in the light of changed times and contexts. About the "Chhaupadi", the customary isolation of women and girls during the menstruation period, which is still common in many rural areas of Nepal, a man working in an organisation that promotes gender equality observed:

In big cities, young people increasingly disregard traditional cultural practices like the chhaupadi, and this is now becoming more accepted within their families²⁴.

5.5.2 Culture and religion on shaping gender norms

The status of women in society is an outcome of the interpretation of religious texts and the cultural and institutional set-up of religious communities (Kelvingrove and Havlicek, 2015). All religious leaders, on both local and national levels, have shared the belief that in Hinduism, men and women are perceived as two halves of the whole or two wheels of a cart. One of the key attributes of Hinduism is the recognition and worship of the Divine in feminine forms. A national-level Hindu leader stated:

Many Hindus revere God's energy, or Shakti through its personification as a Goddess²⁵.

Although certain practices in Hinduism do not align with the texts such as the idea of women's higher position and gender equality, Hinduism stands out among world religions for its respect towards women and their status. Several major religious festivals are entirely dedicated to goddesses like "Vasanta Panchami" to Saraswati and "Navaratri", the core part of "Dashain", to Durga. Tihar (Dewali) is at least partly if not entirely dedicated to Laxmi.

In the oldest sacred texts of Hinduism, the Vedas, there are no rites exclusively reserved for men. Misinterpretation or lack of understanding has led to different practices for boys and girls. Such as the sacred thread ceremony, originally intended for both genders as the commencement of their religious education. However, over time this ceremony became only for boys and men, as the role of priesthood and religious scholarship became monopolised by men. A national-level Hindu religious leader welcomed that there is a trend to reverse this discrimination.

There are a few profound women who teach Hinduism even in Nepal. A few girls have also begun studying at our university²⁶.

²⁴ A man working in the organisation that works for gender equality.

²⁵ National level Hindu Leader

²⁶ A national-level Hindu scholar

Though there is a vast literature on Hinduism, the Vedas are considered its main texts. Both the Vedas, and the Bhagwat Gita, the most revered texts in Hinduism, proclaim equality between men and women. They praise the feminine divine and emphasize the spiritual equality of male and female deities. While the Vedas mention gender roles, their essence underscores the need to treat both genders with respect. The Vedas do not contain any text that aims for gender discrimination. Although women in Hindu society are sometimes perceived as weaker than men, various Hindu scriptures portray them as equals. Depictions of high Hindu goddesses like Lakshmi, Durga, Kali, and Saraswati symbolize strength, wisdom, and prosperity.

Goddesses Durga and Kali are fierce and powerful women who were believed to have been born from the heat of three supreme gods and thus, cannot be controlled by men. It clearly shows that in Hinduism women are not said to be controlled by men²⁷.

And a national level Hindu scholar further shared that:

In Hindu religion, the Mother Goddess, responsible for the universe's well-being, embodies incredible power. Consequently, the religion does not assert men as stronger and women as weaker. Male deities are depicted as incomplete without the power of goddesses²⁸.

National-level Hindu scholars have also emphasised the crucial role of women sages in authoring and completing the Vedas and other Hindu scriptures. Women have held prominent positions in Hindu society in the Vedic period. However, over time, a disconnection between Hindu philosophy and reality has emerged, resulting in women being treated as less than equal.

The Rig Veda contains hymns composed by women such as Maitreyi and the role of Sage Gargi is also mentioned in completing the Upanishad. Therefore, the notion that Hinduism keeps women and girls away from attaining higher education is a false interpretation of the religion and it is completely wrong²⁹.

All religious leaders, social workers, and activists agreed that achieving gender equality for women in Hindu society is challenging, as its interpretation is predominantly men-centric, which is not mandated by the Hindu religion. Women are not treated as equals or accorded the dignity promised by the Hindu teachings. Practices such as barring women from reading holy scriptures, prohibiting their remarriage or restricting property rights are not mentioned in the ancient Hindu texts. Instead, there are many Vedic era examples of women's involvement in both spiritual teaching and living a dignified life. The Vedas state that a household where women are respected and treated equally is blessed. As per the Vedas, women have equal rights as men to inherit property, receive education, and choose their husbands. However, these rights are not practiced in current society as it is controlled by men. Thus, it is not religion that discriminates against women, but rather the society and culture that is making women weak and dependent on men. A community-level religious teacher exemplified this situation with child marriage:

²⁷ A national-level religious leader

²⁸ A national-level Hindu scholar

²⁹ A national-level Hindu scholar

The Vedas do not endorse child marriage; instead, they believe that marriage should only occur when a girl is physically and emotionally prepared. However, later interpretations have promoted early girl-child marriage spiritually benefitting parents but which is not the spirit of the Vedas³⁰.

National and local level religious leaders, community leaders, and rights activists agreed that Hinduism teaches gender equality, affirming that both men and women are equal, and both can achieve spiritual liberation through their actions and devotion to God. While some passages in Hindu scriptures promote gender equality and respect for all beings, others portray differences between genders.

According to religious leaders and scholars, some interpretations of Hindu religion and Hindu culture view women as inferior to men physically, mentally, and spiritually, so they are dependent on male family members. According to *Manu Smriti*, a girl's childhood is protected by her parents, and she is expected to excel in household affairs such as cooking, cleaning etc. After her marriage, her husband is responsible for protecting her. Her husband is regarded as a god, and she is supposed to pray for her husband's health and welfare and fulfil his wishes.

Manu Smriti or the Laws of Manu as of the most important scriptures of Hinduism and one of the most patriarchal and most discriminatory scripture³¹.

All the religious leaders including priests shared that *Manu Smriti*, a Hindu legal text, is often quoted for its patriarchal views, limiting the rights of women. However, these interpretations shouldn't be universal. Primarily, the Vedas, the main Hindu text, position women equally. Even *Manu Smriti*, which is known as one of the most discriminatory texts in Hinduism, certain verses glorify the position of women and of course, several other verses seem to attack the position and freedom women have. However, in practice, those verses challenging women's freedoms and rights are only highlighted and social norms are developed based on these verses.

Verse 56 Where women are honoured, there the gods are pleased, but where they are not honoured, no sacred tire yields reward³².

The main reason for interpreting women as lower than men is patriarchal practices that evolved culturally on the Indian Subcontinent due to several socioeconomic factors. In the post-Vedic era, men dominated society and all the resources and power were controlled by men. Patriarchal society developed the division of labour, another element of Hinduism, that cannot be found in the Vedic era but originated in the post-Vedic era. Frequent wars for conquest and submission became another key feature of patriarchal society. In this context, women were sent to and kept in lower positions. Gender activists and journalists however asserted that women have historically been marginalised and oppressed within Hindu society by imposing patriarchal norms and practices, which have later been embedded and interpreted in Hindu texts and culture.

³⁰ A community-level religious teacher/priest

³¹ A national-level religious leader

³² A local-level religious leader

Hinduism is a complex and diverse religion that has been practiced for thousands of years in various regions of the world, and its teachings and attitudes toward women have evolved and vary among different communities and sects. In ancient times, women held high positions and played important roles in Hindu society. Some Hindu goddesses, such as Durga, Kali, and Lakshmi are worshipped as powerful deities. In the Nepali context, Goddess Lakshmi is worshipped as a standalone goddess of wealth. However, over time, certain patriarchal attitudes and practices have become more prevalent in some Hindu communities, leading to discrimination and mistreatment of women.

Nevertheless, for the respondents it was important to note that Hinduism as a religion does not condone or promote the mistreatment of women. In contrast, the teachings of Hinduism emphasize the importance of respect for all living beings, including women, and many Hindu texts contain stories of strong women. However, Hinduism's treatment of women depends on time, place, and cultural context. It matters, how Hinduism has been interpreted. According to the respondents, Hinduism over time has developed cultural norms for making men powerful and women dependent on men.

5.6 Practices of rewards and punishment for adhering to or deviating from gender roles.

All participants unanimously acknowledge the existence of a system of rewards and punishments for adhering to or deviating from gender norms. Conformity to these norms is intricately linked to one's social status and reputation. Individuals who conform to traditional roles and behaviours, whether men or women, are often esteemed and celebrated within their communities. Moreover, the adherence to gender norms, is commonly perceived as a marker of individual and family harmony within most families.

There exists a prevailing narrative that straying from these norms has the potential to disrupt social order. Consequently, those who deviate from expected gender roles often face criticism and social stigma. However, the strictness of these rewards and punishments varies from community to community and even from household to household. While adherence to gender norms is expected from both men and women, the expectations are notably stricter for women, particularly for daughters-in-laws. Within the spectrum of women, daughters-in-laws are subject to the strictest social control, followed by daughters and then mothers and grandmothers. Family members, especially elders, often pressure the daughters-in-law to conform to gender norms, even resorting to coercion if necessary. If a daughter-in-law attempts to defy these norms, she may face public scrutiny within her neighbourhood, with family members urging her to learn from those who adhere strictly.

The daughter-in-law must be prepared for various forms of violence, including physical violence if she fails to adhere to gender norms. Psychological violence is the most common consequence of deviating from these norms. Both male and female participants identified that gender norms strongly influence various social interactions and daily life, with any deviance often met with strict criticism. Men, in particular, must be prepared to face criticism from elders and community members if they do not adhere to their designated gender roles, such as making and managing earnings and providing safety and protection to the family. If a man fails to fulfil his assigned gender role, he would mostly be mocked to be weak and not a good man. However, in most families, if the husband fails to take on his so-called gender role, his wife would be blamed for bringing bad luck which unable him to meet family needs.

General sanctions for women who deviate from gender norms include restricted movements, social gossiping, discouragement from expressing opinions in public or within the family, and even more limited involvement in key decision-making at home. Some women need to face physical violence too. If a man assists his wife and participates in household chores, he will not face similar dire sanctions. But his neighbours and family members will often disapprove, labelling him a 'joitingre' (a term implying hen-pecked husband). The act of assisting one's wife is generally viewed negatively in most families although there have been some changes, particularly in households where both spouses are educated and employed outside the home.

Nevertheless, even if a woman works outside the home, she is still expected to manage all household responsibilities, regardless of whether her husband is employed or not. Only a small part, hardly 1 to 2 percent of the families, accept men helping with household chores as normal behaviour. A female participant shared her experience, stating that she lives in a joint family. She works for the local government while her husband stays at home. He previously ran a business, but after COVID-19, the business did not go well so he left it. But he is not welcomed by his family to help her:

My husband wants to support me; he wants to clean the room and assist me in the kitchen work. However, my mother-in-law and my father-in-law do not let him work. Whether he tries to help in the kitchen, my mother-in-law does not let him work rather she will come to assist me³³.

A male participant shared that we should not see any problem in assisting our wives with household chores, including kitchen work which is a so-called women's job. However, another man had mixed experiences:

Assisting a wife in the kitchen work is not acceptable in our society. When my female relatives and neighbours came to know that I assisted my wife with kitchen work, I faced outright disapproval and lots of criticism from them. However, I did not listen to them³⁴.

Most male participants, including local-level religious leaders, agreed that if a man cooks or engages in household chores, it is often the women from the home and neighbourhood who make fun of him and remind him that these are typically considered women's jobs.

All in all, male participants, local activists, and those advocating for gender equality shared that the notion of male superiority not only leads to violence but also establishes a belief system where violence is seen as an acceptable means of controlling women who deviate from societal norms. Religious leaders pointed out that both men and women who adhere to gender norms are likely to receive social recognition and acceptance from their peers and community members. However, those who deviate from these norms need to face various forms of violence. In case of men, they mostly face psychological violence and criticism whereas women often need to face both physical and psychological violence to challenge traditional gender roles. The type and intensity of violence inflicted depends on the specific norm being challenged. Overall, they all agreed that social consequences for defying traditional gender roles vary on the individual and the context.

³³ A community leader from the study area

³⁴ A male participant from the study area

5.7 Effectiveness of gender equality-related interventions by both government and civil society actors.

All community-based participants, local activists, and government authorities emphasised the urgent need for gender equality-related interventions from both governmental and civil society actors. They expressed satisfaction with the increased involvement of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in gender equality efforts. However more than 60% of community-based participants, along with nearly all community leaders and activists shared that most of the gender equality-related interventions remain superficial and fail to initiate meaningful change gender governance at the household and community-level.

Respondents voiced concerns regarding the organisations and the project staff overseeing these initiatives, suggesting that they must exhibit exemplary behaviour and values before attempting to facilitate change within communities. They questioned the effectiveness of the current approach and emphasize the necessity for organisations and staff transformation to truly drive gender equality progress. One community leader deplored:

I closely know a female staff member who manages a gender equality project in her area. She discriminates heavily between her son and daughter and prevents her sister-in-law from pursuing higher education or participating in social work³⁵.

Everyone agrees that understanding the context is crucial for success or failure of gender equality efforts. Many participants, both men and women, questioned the traditional approach of focusing solely on women for gender equality work. They strongly suggested interventions targeting entire families instead of just women and selected men. Gender inequality is deeply rooted in patriarchal norms, and addressing these norms requires involving multi-stakeholders, not just women and girls. Though some projects started to involve men and family members, it is just to show and for documentation purposes. Their entire focus is still only on women. Working with men and family requires investing time for persuading them so most of the civil society projects choose the easier path, just engaging women who follow their requests willingly.

I am part of a self-help group where we learn about gender equality and its importance. But I cannot make a difference alone, even in my own home. Real change won't happen unless my mother-in-law, my children above 14, and my husband also change³⁶.

All the female participants, including rights activists, shared that often national-level organisations and activists encourage them to file a case against GBV with the local authorities or the police. However, our context is different. If a woman files a case against her family, she cannot remain with them. Most women do not have another place to live independently. Even their parents do not support them in taking legal action against family members. Given the poor socio-economic status of women, and most importantly for the sake of children, women survivors of GBV are not willing to leave their homes. Therefore, project interventions need to thoroughly analyse the context identify at-risk women and families and design a comprehensive family-focused intervention that ensures the safety of

³⁵ A community leader from the study area

³⁶ A woman participant organised in a local-level self-help group

these women. Legal action should be taken against perpetrators if a woman is economically independent and personally confident to take action; otherwise, reconciliation is important, along with guaranteeing the non-repetition of violence. In the long run, they want all perpetrators to face legal action, but for now, it is not a good solution for everyone.

A woman came to my office with bruises on her face, asking me to mediate with her husband and make him “nice to her” instead of pursuing legal action against him³⁷.

Community development workers and community leaders emphasised the importance of empowering women by making them aware of GBV issues, through economic support, girls’ education, and political participation to address GBV and promote gender equality in the community. They stressed that women’s inclusion in decision and policy-making is essential for prioritising their interests. Participants including local-level religious leaders, highlighted the need to tackle deep-rooted patriarchal attitudes and social norms through intensive interventions rather than superficial ones. They suggested media campaigning, mobilising religious leaders, constructively engaging men, and boys, and fostering grassroots movements along with making duty bearers accountable for gender equality.

A more effective implementation of the legal framework, robust monitoring and evaluation, and addressing gender intersectionality were also highlighted as key actions required for addressing GBV. National-level organisations advocating for gender equality stressed the importance of using adult learning methods like case studies and storytelling to empower men, religious leaders, and duty-bearers. They also focused on the importance of modelling and mobilising passionate locals including men, youths, volunteers, and staff to challenge GBV.

One national-level gender activist highlighted the need to reconsider the approach of engaging men in gender equality efforts, proposing a shift from merely asking men to give up privileges and inviting them to share decision-making, respecting women, and treating women as equal partners. It is rather crucial to engage with men and help them understand the consequence of GBV, including its effects on men and society as a whole, and why gender norms are not beneficial for men too. Despite conducting numerous gender equality sessions for men, religious leaders, and government officials I observed that none of these sessions resulted in tangible changes in their behaviour. However, in 2020 I conducted a session with 14 men where I illustrated the costs of GBV for men, families, and society using data and two case studies. I discovered that most men were willing to change their behaviours following the training. Subsequent follow-ups also revealed that this single session had a significant impact and proved to be highly effective.

Nine out of the 14 men who attended the session have shown complete transformation. This positive change has been confirmed by their wives and children too³⁸.

³⁷ A senior Police Officer from the study area

³⁸ A national-level gender activist

6 CONCLUSION

This qualitative study conducted in Nawalparasi, a district of Lumbini Province in the Tarai region (lowlands) of Nepal, delved into the role of Hindu customs, culture, and religious belief in shaping and perpetuating discriminatory gender norms. The findings reveal complex interrelationships between religion, culture, and gender norms. The study examined the influence of these factors on decision-making processes, prescribed gender roles, and associated rewards and punishments. The combined Gender Schema Theory and Gender Power Theory helped to identify the development and institutionalisation process of discriminatory gender norms. The institutionalisation of discriminatory gender norms often involves the strategic referencing of certain Hindu texts or text passages which promote male supremacy while neglecting other Hindu texts and passages that advocate for gender equality and the elevation of women's dignity. Consequently, a patriarchal system emerges and takes deep roots in society. A summary of the findings is presented below.

Born into traditional roles

The research found that gender roles are deeply entrenched in a belief system that upholds male supremacy. Men are viewed as the carriers of a family name, legacy, and heritage, while women are considered merely as supporters. Women bear the primary responsibility for household chores, care for family members' emotional and physical well-being, and create a conducive environment for tasks assigned to men. Men are expected to be breadwinners, manage finances, protect the family, and assume leadership roles both within and outside the household. These roles are often perceived as predetermined by birth rather than the result of socialisation, with families' honour and prestige largely dependent on daughters fulfilling their gender roles. Although some changes have occurred, with women starting to earn money and assume leadership roles, they still bear the burden of managing household chores alone, leading to overwork with the dual responsibility. Men's reluctance to engage in household responsibilities discourages women from seeking proactive and leadership roles in society.

Power dynamics & decision making

Power dynamics between men and women are predominantly male-centric. Key decisions regarding land transactions, educational choices for children, and community matters are primarily made by men. While about 30% of participants reported that men consult women for decisions, the final authority rests with men. Women generally have limited access to and control over financial resources, further restricting their involvement in decision-making processes. Male out-migration has created opportunities for some women to take up leadership roles and gain authority and control over resources in households with absent men. However, the increased accessibility of mobile phones has somewhat hindered women's decision-making autonomy, as they often consult their husbands living abroad for household decisions.

Cultural norms vs religious principles

The study revealed that most community members view culture and religion as closely intertwined, with cultural practices largely shaped by religious beliefs. Disregarding cultural norms is often seen as violating religious principles. However, some community leaders recognise culture as a social construct influenced by religion, yet broader in scope, with different cultural practices existing within the same religious community.

Religious texts like the Vedas emphasise gender equality, but their interpretation has often been male-centric. While Hinduism recognises and worships the Divine in feminine forms and several major religious festivals are dedicated to goddesses, patriarchal attitudes have become more prevalent over time in Hindu communities. This has led to a disconnection between Hindu philosophy and reality, resulting in women being treated as less than equal. Both religious leaders and activists acknowledged that it is not religion itself that discriminates against women, but rather the societal and cultural interpretations that have developed over time, making women weak and dependent on men. The *Manu Smriti*, a Hindu text, contains verses that both glorify and limit women's positions, but in practice, those challenging women's freedoms are more often highlighted and form the basis of social norms.

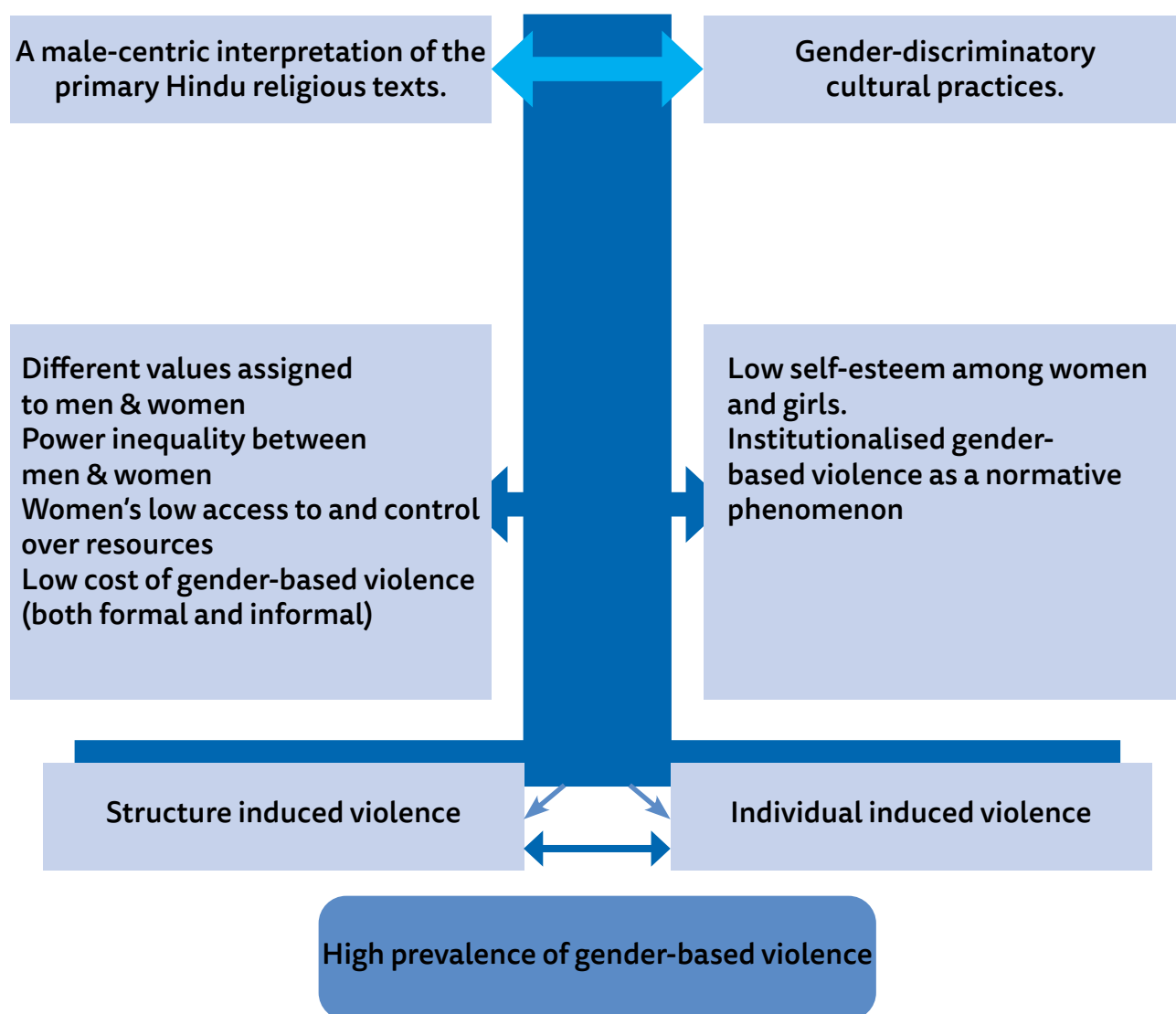
Dilemma of social approval and shame

Men who conform to traditional gender roles are esteemed and celebrated within their communities. Adherence to these norms is linked to individual and family harmony. Men who deviate from their assigned gender roles, such as failing to provide economically for their families, face criticism from elders and community members, often being mocked as weak or not "real men." However, men typically experience less severe consequences compared to women, primarily facing psychological rather than physical violence. If a man assists his wife with household chores, he may encounter social disapproval and be labelled as "*joitingre*" (hen-pecked husband). Interestingly, it is often women from the household and neighbourhood who criticise men for engaging in traditionally female tasks, highlighting how deeply internalised these gender norms are throughout the community.

Women who adhere to traditional roles receive social recognition and acceptance. However, those who deviate face much stricter consequences than men. Women- especially daughters-in-law- are subjected to the strictest social control, followed by daughters, mothers, and grandmothers. Women who challenge traditional norms encounter sanctions that include restricted movement, social gossip, discouragement from expressing opinions, limited involvement in decision-making, and even physical violence. Family members, particularly elders, often pressure daughters-in-law to conform to gender norms, resorting to coercion if necessary. The justification for these punishments is rooted in the desire to preserve social order and family harmony, with the prevailing belief that deviating from established norms disrupts social cohesion.

The study reveals that the system of rewards and punishments for adherence to gender norms varies in strictness across communities and households; however, it is generally more rigid for women. The notion of male superiority not only leads to violence but also establishes a belief system in which violence is viewed as an acceptable means of controlling women who deviate from societal norms. While some individuals, particularly those with higher education and employment outside the home, have shown resistance to traditional gender roles, such changes remain confined to a small percentage of families (approximately 1-2%). Participants questioned the effectiveness of current gender equality interventions, describing many efforts as superficial and failing to bring about meaningful change in gender governance at the household and community levels. Participants emphasised the need for more comprehensive approaches that involve entire families rather than focusing solely on women. The research highlighted that legal recourse is often impractical for many women due to economic dependence and concerns for their children, suggesting that context-specific interventions are essential for effectively challenging entrenched gender norms and practices.

Factors leading to Gender-Based Violence. Field Study, 2023



6.1 Areas of other research

Separate research will be needed on effective strategies for challenging gender norms and harnessing men as change agents. Likewise, another assessment on exploring gender-equitable practices within Hindu culture is also crucial and can serve as a valuable resource for combating harmful and discriminatory gender norms.

7 RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the report suggests the following recommendations primarily aimed at civil society actors and local authorities involved in practical efforts to combat gender-based violence at the local level:

POTENTIAL INTERVENTIONS AND STRATEGIES BY ACTORS	
Civil Society Organisations and Actors	Duty Bearers, Local Government
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Foster dialogues on the adaptive nature of culture in relation to gender norms. Culture evolves according to context and local requirements. -Facilitate dialogues on harmful/gender-biased interpretations of religious texts at the community to national levels. -Encourage academic and theological scrutiny of religious text interpretation. -Leverage the influence of national-level religious scholars to change biased gender norms. -Consider capacity building and Mobilisation of local priests for addressing GBV. -Design interventions to enhance a wider level of understanding of GBV aligning awareness sessions with human rights perspective and the societal cost of GBV. -Integrate GBV sessions into educational institutions such as schools/colleges, targeting youth as agents of change. -Utilise inter-generational dialogues, men, religious leaders, and youth-focused initiative, and modelling approaches to effectively combat GBV -Demonstrate exemplary behaviour within the organisation and among the project staff regarding gender equality. -Implement intensive family-focused interventions to transform gender governance at the family and community levels. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Carry out a comprehensive assessment to identify the impact of gender-based violence in all walks of life and strictly implement its recommendations. -Develop a concise framework and guidelines for addressing GBV, as mere enactment of rudimentary acts and policies may not achieve desired outcomes. -Increase efforts to combat GBV by promoting the human rights of all and addressing root causes such as discriminatory gender norms, limited access to education and economic opportunities for women, and their lack of control over resources and decision-making process. -Facilitate and encourage collaboration between civil society actors and the government on gender equality efforts.

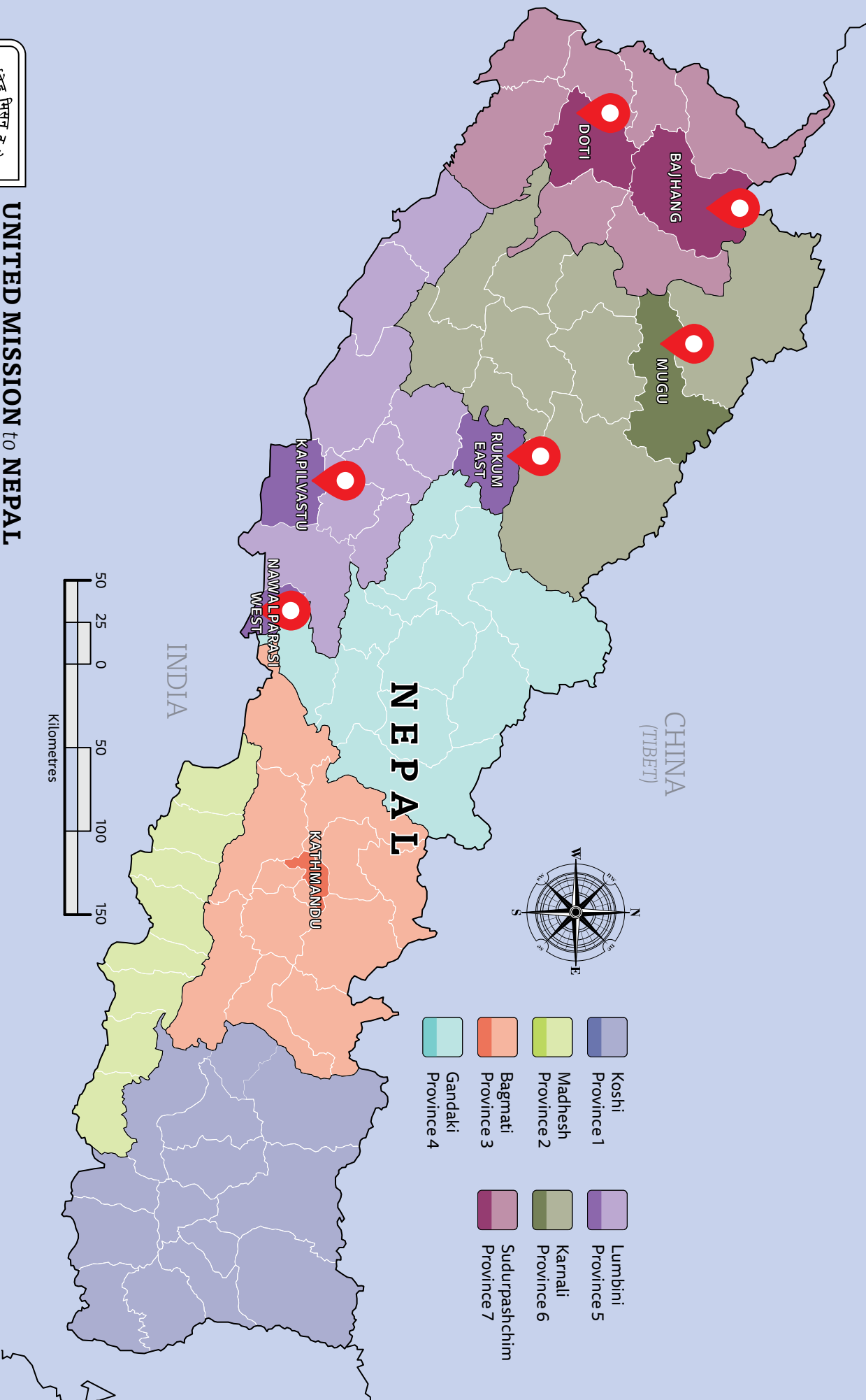
POTENTIAL INTERVENTIONS AND STRATEGIES BY ACTORS

Civil Society Organisations and Actors	Duty Bearers, Local Government
<p>Advocate for the inclusion of women in policy-making to drive policy shifts.</p> <p>Use of adult-focused method, Utilising case story, research findings, and storytelling methods</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Target women leading households due to husbands' migration for rapid positive change and role modelling. -Promote evidence-based media campaigns to combat GBV -Promote and support community-led movement to challenge GBV -Focus on ensuring proper implementation of existing legal provisions and advocate for progressive laws. -Engage men constructively in GBV prevention efforts -Incorporate mental health components into gender equality intervention. Take into account alcohol abuse in the project design as it has been identified not as a primary cause but as a key trigger of physical, Psychosocial, and sexual violence. -Identify, document, and Utilise positive practices within Hindu culture to promote gender equality. -In Hindu culture, various practices regarding gender norms exist, some promoting gender equality while others do not. -Consider the importance of changing household-level gender governance rather than solely relying on legal actions. <p>While legal action against perpetrators is necessary however transforming family gender dynamics is crucial, especially if a woman lacks economic independence and confidence to pursue legal recourse. Ensuring non-repetition of violence should be Prioritised in both legal actions and efforts to change family gender governance. All the efforts should be guided by the best interest of survivors.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Develop critical mass within settlements and communities to challenge GBV. -Promote a systemic, multi-stakeholder approach to address GBV 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Prioritise gender equality initiatives in local government plans and actions, aligning with national priorities. -Establish an accessible mechanism for rights holders to engage with and monitor the government's efforts in addressing GBV.

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