Understanding the Influence of Socio-Cultural Factors in School Drop Out of Girls: A study in two districts of Madhesh Province, Nepal

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Abstract

This paper sheds light in understanding the socio-cultural determinants for school dropout among adolescent girls in Dhanusha and Rautahat districts of Nepal. This study employed a mixed method approach to explore the reasons for dropout. The finding derived a conclusion that discriminatory gender norms, and traditional beliefs and practices lead girls to drop out. The research suggests traditional beliefs regarding women as wives with majority of the domestic responsibilities and early marriage limit their educational opportunities. Additionally, restricted mobility and lack of autonomy, and menstrual stigma also leads to school dropout. This study therefore aims to illuminate the importance of understanding these underlying factors in order to work towards creating a supportive environment that promotes girls' autonomy, and agency within their household, and communities.

Keywords : Girls' Education Challenges, Dropout, Social norms

1.1 Introduction

The World Bank defines education as a powerful driver of development for reducing poverty, gender inequality, and instability (World Bank, 2018). For this purpose, providing equitable quality education has been identified as a priority in Sustainable Development Goal 4 (UNESCO, 2015). However, a positive impact of education is less likely to be achieved unless key issue such as school dropout is addressed first, and this can only be achieved if every child completes their education without dropping out along the way (UNICEF, 2018).

The term dropout has a universal denotation and can simply be understood as an abandonment of school before completing the course (Onyeefulu et.al, 2019). Empirical evidence suggests that there are multiple factors associated with dropping out, and these factors emerge not only from individual choice but also from situation within the household (Sabates, et al., 2010). Researchers also suggest that school dropout is more common among girls (Bandyopadhyay & Subrahmanian,2008; Khatri, 2022). Studies have shown that adolescent girls living in extreme poverty are three times more likely to drop out without receiving secondary education. Although there is no single cause of dropout, gender norms and poverty are argued to be the factors for this (OECD, 2022; Khatri, 2022).

The issue of school dropout is a serious concern in most societies around the globe, and Nepal is no exception. The Constitution of Nepal guarantees free and compulsory education up to basic level and free education up to secondary level. According to the Nepal Law Commission, (2019), the country has made great strides in improving education access and achieving a net enrolment rate. In addition, a variety of policies, including provision of free textbooks and school meal program has also been put in place to encourage school enrolment. Despite these effort, substantial number of the most vulnerable children especially girls are still out of school (MoE & UNICEF, 2016). This gap exists because policies have mostly focused on addressing the problem of school enrolment, but rarely the issue of school dropout. This paper, thus, is positioned as an inquiry and is rather suggestive research in understanding the factors causing school dropout among girls in Madhesh province of Nepal.

This study is aimed to assess the socio-cultural factors influencing girls to drop out of schools in Dhanusha, and Rautahat districts of the Madhesh province. This study particularly attempts to answer the following research questions:

- What are socio-cultural factors that lead girls to drop out of school?

- How do these factors exert their influence among girls to drop out?

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1.2 Methodology

This study adopted a cross-sectional research design. Cross-sectional study is carried out at one time point, or, over a short period to estimate the prevalence of the outcome of interest, for a given population (Levin, 2006; McMillan, 2008). The reason for choosing Madhesh province as the areas of the study because it is considered one of the least performing provinces in terms of education development. According to the National Census 2021, the literacy rate of Madhesh Province lies at the percentage of 49.72% meaning that not even half of the population in Madhesh are literate. Further, data depicted that in the year 2021, about 3.6% students droped out of school nationally, out of which 2.91% were in Madhesh Province (NHR, 2023). Primary data was collected using a mixed-method approach which helped collecting different but complementary information in understanding the reason for school dropout among girls (Creswell, 2017). According to Creswell (2014), a mixed method study is a combination of both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection that enables in understanding the research topic in greater depth (Creswell, 2014). With regards to the sampling design, a non-probability purposive sampling was used for both quantitative and qualitative part of the study. A sample of six schools from two districts was chosen for the study based on purposive sampling technique as it allowed researcher to choose a population of interest based on accessibility and feasibility (Bryman, 2012). For the selection of respondents, a sample of 120 girls from grade 7 and 8 were selected based on their willingness to participate in the survey. These grade in particular were chosen because data showed that in general school dropout among girls is more prominent before they complete their secondary education (SSDP Nepal, 2019). Questionnaire survey was the instrument designed to collect quantitative data. With regards to the qualitative part of the study, a total of four Focused Group Discussions (FGDs) with school going girls and six semi-structured interviews with parents, school teachers, and education officer at the provincial level. For the quantitative analysis, descriptive statistics using SPSS 25 was used, while for the qualitative part of the study, QDA Miner Lite was used to analyze, and interpret the data to generate the findings and results,

1.3 Review of Literature

1.3.1 History of Education in Nepal

To To understand the context of school dropout among girls, it is equally important to understand the history of girls' education in Nepal. The history of Education in Nepal is recent and it dates back to 1952 when it was considered a fundamental tool for development (National Education Planning Commission, 1956). However, it was only in 1990 that the constitution recognized girls' right to education to promote female participation in national development (MOE, 2004). Within the new political climate of 1990, education was accorded as a high priority, and it was in the same year that Nepal became a part of Education for All (EFA) campaign. Thereafter, in the year 2007, the Interim Constitution took the initiative to make education free up to the secondary level (GoN, Interim Constitution, 2007). This initiative increased the Net Enrollment Rate from 93.7% 2009 to 96.6% in 2015 for grade 1-5, and the overall enrollment increased for grade (1-8) from 83.2 % to 88.7% during the same time (SSDP & ADB, 2015). Despite the progress in school attainment, dropout and school retention especially among girls still is a major challenge (Bhattarai,2017).

The term dropout has a universal denotation and can simply be understood as an abandonment of school before completing the course (Onyeefulu et.al, 2019). Although there is no single cause of dropout, gender norms and poverty are argued to be the factors for this (OECD, 2021; Gurung, 2016). The Global Gender Gap Report of 2015 ranked Nepal as the second-most improved country in the world on Educational Attainment and third-most improved globally on the overall Index and on Health and Survival. Despite these improvements, there is still inequality in achievements across communities, geographical areas, ethnic groups, class and administrative boundaries. Socio-cultural norms and practices relating to gender still play a key role in determining access to education for many girls in Nepal. Although Nepal has made tremendous progress toward the goal of providing education for all, in keeping with the Sustainable Development Goals for 2030, and the Education for all initiative, girls' dropout continues to be a challenge.

1.3.2 Policy environment in Nepal

TThe current achievement in the educational development for women and girls in Nepal is largely attributable to the Education for All (EFA) campaign of 1990. This international commitment came as a support for the development of basic and primary education in Nepal. Since then, many policies have been enacted in favour of promoting girls' education. In the year 2000, the EFA campaign adopted the Dakar Framework for Action (DFA) focused to deliver quality education by developing technical capacity and resources. The EFA Policy (2002-2015) further aimed at gender mainstreaming and training to teachers on gender sensitivity (Neupane,2019). In the year 2003/2004, Ministry of Education (MoE) focused on teachers and scholarships to women from various marginalized groups. In 2007, the Interim Constitution was enacted which took the initiative to make education free up to secondary level (GoN, Interim Constitution, 2007). Thereafter, the new constitution enacted in 2015 affirmed the right of all citizens to compulsory and free basic education up to the secondary level (GoN, 2015). The free basic and primary education connoted free

tuition fee and free textbooks (UNESCO, 2008). This initiative increased the net enrollment rate (NER) for primary grades (1-5) from 93.7 % in SY2009 to 96.6 % in SY2015, and the NER for overall basic education (grades 1-8) increased from

83.2 % to 88.7 % in the same period. Despite these enacted education policies, girls dropout still remain a challenge in the country (Neupane,2017).

1.3.3 Why invest in girls' education?

Investing in girls' education yields two benefits; one is the social benefit, and the other is the economic benefit. Social returns are essential for increasing girls' bargaining power at home and within society. Additionally, it is the key to overturning oppressive customs and traditions which have neglected the needs of girls and women. Furthermore, educated mothers are more likely to send both their daughters and sons to school and to keep them in school longer. In a study of maternal educational characteristics and their impact on girls' education in Nepal, it was found that one additional year of a mother's education increased her daughter's probability of completing the eighth grade by 3–5 percentage points and schooling level by 0.2 years (Dahal, Topping & Levy,2021). Therefore, it can be argued that educating girls has a ripple effect that not only enhances the wellbeing of individuals, but also contributes to the well-being of the broader society. Another important consideration is the economic benefit. According to the World Bank study, each year that a girl attends secondary school corresponds to an 18% increase in her earnings in the future. A study conducted in Nepal found that the returns to education are higher at the upper-secondary level and that the returns to education for women are greater than those for men (Dunusinghe, 2021). Thus, increasing girls' education opportunities contributes to reducing inequality, increasing decision-making potential, and strengthening economies (Kushiyait, 2010; Kola 2014; UNICEF, 2020).

1.3.4 Theoretical lens of the study

The theoretical rationale of this paper draws on Butler's theory of performativity. Before delving into describing theory of performativity, it is crucial to understand the meaning of the term gender and performativity. Psychologist Robert Stoller who was the first to distinguish between the terms gender and sex, defined gender as feminine and masculine behavior an individual displays, and sex as the biological characteristics of a person (Mikkola 2017). The distinction between gender and sex is used to make a separation between the sexed body on one hand and the gendered behavior of people on the other hand. According to Butler (1990), gender identity is not biologically determined; it is rather reinforced and is produced by gender norms in society by multiple intersecting factors such as locations, race, class,

nationality, culture, religion, education among other things. Butler's theory of performativity argues that gender is something we enact and do rather than something we are, and own. She suggests that an individual is not born with sex but rather sex is made by the everyday choices that they make in life. This notion as defined by Butler is socially constructed where many females perform gender related actions that build into the determination of the gender roles/sex. A key element of gender performativity is the iteration of the act, "Performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate act, but, rather, as the reiterative practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names" (Butler, 1990 p.2). Butler (1990), considers that, the concept of being a female is a challenge, owing not only to society's view of women as a social category, but, a culturally conditioned or constructed subjective identity. She reasons that women's' actions are limited because she is a female and the reason for such controlled action is because gender is politically and socially controlled. This controlled gender performance means that people become tied into a 'normalized' gender role which is culturally and socially defined as being a 'normal 'female/male'. She asserts that the idea of 'true gender' cannot be defined, since the qualities of gender are part of a broader narrative that helps reinforce stereotypes and expectations of what it means to be male or female.

In the context of girls' school dropout, the fact that more girls still drop out due to various reasons like early marriage, household chores, lack of mobility among other things proves that women' role is linked to domestic spheres and as care takers. The society discursively construct the ideal womanhood with care and domestic sphere. According to Butler (1990), "Gender identity is defined as the outcome of the habitual performative acts that an individual partakes and which are controlled and given shape by the culturally and socially enforced gender norms." The outcome of gender identity was the illusory effect which demonstrated that a women's gender was based on the roles that they were expected to carry which were viewed as natural because they are associated with the biological sex of the individual. School dropout among girls due to such norms often appears natural, reinforcing stereotypical views that may persist in the future.

1.4 Overview of the Findings

This section explains the overall research finding in line with the research questions. In the beginning of the section, demographic information of the respondents is explained. The demographic information highlights respondent's language, ethnicity, and age. This is followed by analysis of different factors socio-cultural factors leading to school dropout.

1.4.1 Respondent's profile

Among the 120 respondents, the majority (51%) spoke Maithili as their primary language, followed by 26% of the respondents who spoke Bajika. There were 21% respondents who used Nepali as their primary language, and the remaining 2% used Bhojpuri. Data revealed that Maithili language was widely spoken in Dhanusha district, Bajika and Bhojpuri was only used in Rautahat district, and Nepali was used in both the districts. In regards to ethnicity, the caste and ethnicity were categorized into seven sub-groups on the basis of CBS directives (CBS, 2021). Based on the distribution of household by ethnicity, majority of the respondents were predominantly Terai Madhesi Dalit (30.83%), followed by Hill Brahmin/ Chettri (23.33%). Terai Madhesi Janajati covered 19.16% of the sample and Madhesi Brahmin/Chettri covered 15% of the sample. Tharus (3.67%) and Hill Janajati (4.5%) were the lowest in the sample. The fact that there were less representation of Hill dalit, Janajati, and Tharu was because national data showed that Madhesh province had more Madhesi representation than representation of people from the hills. In regards to age, data depicted that majority (75%) of the respondents belonged to the age group10-14 years, while the remaining respondents were from the age group 15-19 years. The average age of the girls who participated in the survey was 14 years.

1.4.2 Factors influencing for school dropout

It is widely accepted that education greatly benefits individuals and it is one of the most effective development investments nations can make (USAID, 2008). Education result in greater socio-economic gains, and especially educating girls produces greater benefit (ibid). Nonetheless, there still are girls who do not get opportunities to continue their education due to various reasons. Among the many barriers to education opportunities for girls, this study only covers the socio-cultural aspect. The researchers of this study understand socio-cultural factors as social and cultural practices that shape and influence individuals' beliefs, ideas, attitudes and behaviour within a specific context. In this study socio-cultural factor is understood as social norms, values and institution that shape an individual as identified by Durkheim (Durkheim,1912). Socio-cultural factors such as gender stereotyping, and deep-rooted social norm prevalent in the society hinder girls' opportunity to continue education leading to dropout. The widespread operation of patriarchal social systems which includes early marriage, menstruation, domestic duties, intergeneration education affect the participation of girls in education and generally lower regard for the value of female life. The traditional beliefs of parents have made young girls to believe that girl-child education is not important because educated women do not make good wives. This section explores early marriage, home responsibility and menstruation as barriers to girls' education in detail.

1.4.3 Domestic Liabilities

Home responsibility was seen as a major barrier for girls to continue their education. Data depicted that for 22.5% of the girls, home responsibilities curtailed for attending schools. All the respondents were unanimous in their response that household chores acted as the biggest barriers for girls. Girls in the district were expected to bear a significant portion of the household responsibilities due to parental expectations and socialization norms. Girls stated during the FGDs that their parents naturally expected them to perform household chores rather than their brothers. In addition to this, in KII conducted with parents, it was mentioned that women were needed in the household so that they can cook for the family, and take care of the household.

A comparison of boys' and girls' daily routine painted a clearer picture. When girls were asked about their daily routine while they went to school, almost all the girls stated that upon their return from school, they would have to be involved in chores like fetching water, cooking and washing the dishes. One of the girls during FGD explains "By the time we finish our chores, we feel tired, especially during the summer season, when the heat is unbearable, we have no time to do homework" (FGD grade 7 girls Dhanusha). When the parents of the girls were asked about their son and what their son did after returning back from school, one of the parents interviewed shared "boys usually come home late as they spend time with their friends, we do not really ask them what they do after school" (KII with male parent, Rautahat). The consequence of this amply summed up by quantitative data where it depicted that the average study hours for girls was only 1.9 hours which they spent mostly doing homework. On the other hand, the girls' average time devoted to household chores was 3.4 hours. In some circumstances, when girls do get a chance to attain education, they didn't get a proper environment to study at home, as well as in school which was a result of the prevailing cultural norm. The household barriers mentioned particularly resonate with the argument of Butler who stresses on performative action caused by social norms creating gender roles. In this case boys and girls trained into doing different activities and fitting into their perceived gender roles i.e., for girl working in the kitchen, and for boys making friends normalize male hegemony over women (Butler, 2001).

1.4.4 Early Marriage

Early marriage is another factor that acts as an impediment in girls' education. The finding generated from this study suggested that 16.67% of the girls did not attend school due to early marriage. Parents in communities had a perception that girls if not married at a tender age would never be married her entire life. In KII conducted with parents, it was mentioned 'if unmarried girls stay at home

for too long, she would be looked upon as a burden to the family' (KII with female parent, Dhanusha). A good number of respondents also expressed that girl's education is considered as burden. Therefore, majority of the parents married off their daughters as early as possible.

A key informant mentioned "In our conservative rural society, women are treated as burden in terms of economic returns and output" (Education officer, Janakapur municipality). In addition to this, some girl's parents said they would want to delay marriage, but the fear of social stigma and dishonor prevented them from acting on their wishes, and made them susceptible to pressure from potential grooms' families, neighbors, relatives and the community. In the end, both mothers and fathers seemed to be acting more in response to prevailing social norms than to their own wishes. ''Parent mostly do not allow girls to go to school after certain point because they fear that when girls acquire education, they would no longer respect them or their husbands' (Education officer, Rautahat).

Social norms influenced individual decision-making, overriding other considerations and tilting the balance in favor of child marriage. Fear of shame, dishonor, or loss of respect within their communities played a significant role in shaping behaviors and the decisions.

1.4.5 Mobility of girls

Social norms and culture played a part in influencing girls' mobility because some of the cultural beliefs do not support the idea of women going out of their homes to fend for their families or for trainings/education. This was viewed as men's role and women who do not adhere to this are ostracized in the community. In this study, quantitative data depicted that 68.33% of the girls did not attend school due to lack of mobility. The attitude that girls' mobility should be limited stood strong in the community both the districts and was identified as a direct barrier.

Table 1: Mobility of girls and freedom

S. N	Item	Frequency	Percentage
1	Girls should have mobility as boys	38	31.67%
2	Girls should not have mobility as boys	82	68.33%
	Total	120	100%

It is often seen that in villages mostly schools are till primary level, for a higher education, parents have to send their children either to the city or somewhere which is distant from home. During qualitative consultation, girls unanimously stated that their parents did not allow them to go outside the village to pursue their higher-level education. Hence despite passing grade five, girls devoid of the opportunity to study further. When these girls' parents were enquired about the incident parents

reported that they were scared about what the 'community would think' if girls' started roaming about freely like boys. "How will we be answerable to the community if something happens to our girls? We cannot let them roam freely anywhere like boys do. Boys are generally stronger in that sense"(KII, male parent in Dhanusha).

Such stigma attached to girls could be very damaging and parents reported that there were chances, their daughters might not find appropriate husband in the future. This was the reason; they barred their daughters from travelling outside their village for studies or work. Community leaders who were interviewed also opined that girl are more susceptible to violence than boys because of which they have restrictions to do the things they want to do.

Most of the girls interviewed were already a drop out. When asked if they wanted to re-join school none of them wished to do so instead, they wanted to get some kind of training to start their own business. The girls believed that they had equal caliber to engage in income earning activities as boys. But despite their will, the ultimate decision making was in the hands of the household head. "We also want to study and work but it is hard in our community to follow that. Everyone here gets married so we have to follow the same" (FGD grade 8 girls in Rautahat).

Moreover, girls also mentioned that social norms and culture played a part in influencing their mobility because some of the cultural beliefs do not support the idea of girls going out of their homes to fend for their families or even education. This is viewed as a boy's role and girls who do not adhere to this are ostracized in the community. When asked the reason for restriction, girls opined that it was due to the social norms and fear that they could elope with some other men they were restricted. "The amount of household chores we have to perform at home gives us less time to think of anything else even if it means going out for future education, we do not have time to even think about going out of the house." (FGD grade 8 girls Dhanusha).

Girls were also asked about their decision-making ability at home. Data suggested that 83.33% of the girls could not make their own decision. When the reasons for this were explored through a qualitative lens, most of the girls agreed that they could not make any decision without the consent of their parents or the household head. One of the girls shared "My sister had to sacrifice her wish to open a tailoring shop because her in-laws did not allow it." (FGD, grade 8 girls Rautahat) It can hence be inferred from this finding that it is not that girls cannot make choices but their choices are dependent on the willingness of their parents or the household head that makes decisions for them.

Table 2: Girl's ability to make decision

S. N	Item	Frequency	Percentage
1	Can make own decisions	20	16.67%
2	Cannot make own decisions	100	83.33%
	Total	120	100%

This opens up doors to a lot of debate regarding the status of girls inside the household. Even when girls are capable to make their own life choices, their autonomy is hindered due to patriarchal mindset. Some of the patterns observed suggested impediments to women's involvement, linked to norms and obligations at home. The lack of work opportunity especially for girls is seen as a structural as well as a gender problem discouraging parents to invest on their daughter's education. This also stood as one of the major community level barriers for most of the girls. "Most of the parents in our area come from poor background, they do not see education as a priority for them. For them it is better for the whole family if the girls worked at home and learned household work rather than attend further school as they think do not see the return" (KII Head teacher, Dhanusha).

1.4.6 Menstruation Stigma

In many cultures, menstruation is considered a young girl's first foray into womanhood. However, girls in schools are made victims of their menstruation, and this is reflected in the hindrance that often impact education. The quantitative findings showed that 12.5% of the girls do not go to schools while menstruating. It was found from the qualitative finding that most of the girls simply did not have access to sanitary products, they faced discrimination and stigma during their periods, and many did not have educational resources to inform them about safe and sanitary hygiene practices. Period stigma often comes from superstitious beliefs that paint women who menstruate as impure. This phenomenon dates back for centuries, and is prevalent among numerous cultures, religions, and backgrounds even today. While exploring the issue further through qualitative research, it was found that parents did not want girls to go to school while they were on their cycle. "Girls often skip school during menstruation because parents to not wish to send them to school, and mostly they themselves do not come to school. Due to this reason girls miss up to five school days a month" (Head teacher, Rautahat). In FGDs conducted with the girls, all the girls unanimously agreed that stigma attached to menstruation coupled with lack of proper access to resources, often force them to stay home from school during their periods. Head Teacher of one of the schools in Dhanusha said, "At the maximum, some have estimated that girls might be missing as much as 10 to 20 percent of school days due to menstruation (Head teacher, Dhanusha). KIIs conducted with the parents gave a mixed response regarding menstruation. While some

parents shared it was alright for girls to go to school during menstruation, others had a contrasting opinion regarding the same. Parents shared that girl during menstruation should stay at home and not play with boys in the school as it may harm them

Table 3: Availability of sanitary pads at schools

S.N	Item	Frequency	Percentage
1	Girls who had sanitary pad disposal facility at school	5	4.16%
2	Girls who did not have sanitary pad disposal facility at school	115	95.83%
	Total	120	100%

Lack of sanitary pad disposal facility also played a major role in affecting girls' education. When the girls were asked whether their schools had sanitary pad disposal facilities, 95.83% of them said that schools did not have such facility. Key informant interviews (KIIs) conducted with the teachers and head teachers pointed out that girls avoid coming to school in their menstruation because they feel shy. However, FGDs conducted with the parents and girls gave a completely contrasting view. The findings from FGDs with parents and girls suggested that lack of proper toilet in schools make it difficult for girls to come to school during periods. They said that schools neither have proper locks in the toilet nor there is water when needed. When asked if they would attend school if there were proper toilets, girls said that they would definitely attend school. This was validated by the response of the girls whereby more than 60% of the girls said that it is due to unhygienic toilets that they do not attend schools during menstruation. Hence, it can be inferred that girls miss school not because of menstruation, but rather due to lack of proper toilet facilities inside school premises. Evidence appears to support the fact that menstruation act as a barrier and girls missing school during their periods is because of stigma attached to it.

1.5 Conclusion

The findings highlighted those socio-cultural prejudices concerning girls' educational attainment were highly prevalent in the study area. Factors such as domestic liabilities, early marriages, restriction in mobility, stigma against menstrual cycle and lack of autonomy were identified as reasons for school dropout among girls in Madhesh province. This study also highlighted that girls' home environment is not conducive for studying, which eventually stop them from going to school altogether. This was clearly seen in the finding of the study where in comparison to an average study time of 1.9 hours (when they were in school), girls spent on an average 3.4 hours doing household chores per day. Although girls in the sample shared that they have aspirations for the future, they were well aware that these aspirations would not be achieved due to the deep-rooted norms and lack of

autonomy to take a step forward. The lack of enabling environment along with conservative social-cultural values deprived them of their educational rights.

The association of boys having the education rights and girls being rejected to such rights due to social norms depict the normalized dichotomies of gender system. This example fits into what Butler says about gender identity, that it gets its presumed 'naturalness' through continued reaffirmation of gender enactments following cultural norms pertaining to definitions of masculinity-the idealized enactments of being manly, and conceptions of femininity-the idealized enactments of being womanly (Butlerr,1990). Based on the above discussion, it can be said that such norms and values maintain the existing social order of the society. While these findings are unsettling, it is worth noting that these findings are not unique, as a recent global assessment of progress on SDG 4.7 notes that countries are still falling short in solving the issue of school dropout (UNESCO,2020). Therefore, corrective measures such as awareness on importance of education among families and communities, creating safe and supportive learning environments that foster girls' confidence and well-being, comprehensive training for teachers on gender-responsive pedagogy, classroom management, and on understanding the needs of girls, and implementing robust data collection systems to track girls' enrollment, attendance, and dropout rates would be imperative to address this issue.

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