

# ***Siddhajyoti Interdisciplinary Journal (SIJ)***

Vol. III, January, 2022

(A Peer Reviewed Open Access Research Journal)

ISSN: 2645-8381

Published by Research Management Cell, Siddhajyoti Education Campus Sindhuli

<https://www.nepjol.info/index.php/sij>

## **Disparity in girls' participation and achievement in school education in Nepal**

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**Article History:** *Received:* 30 June 2021; *Reviewed:* 30 November 2021; *Accepted:* 10 December 2021

### **Abstract**

*Empowering girls and ensuring gender equality in society is a global aspiration. Education is an important means for girls' empowerment since it can have multiple effects on girls' empowerment and gender equality in society. Presently, girls' enrollment to school education in Nepal seems good; however, their learning achievement is low. This article focuses on the status of girls' access to school education and their learning achievement. Secondary data have been analyzed to determine the status of girls' access to school education and their achievement. The study reveals a huge disparity in learning achievement between girls and boys. Girls' learning achievement is lower than boys and this disparity is deeper with girls from public schools. Improving girls learning achievement needs special attention in the classroom and school to achieve the goal of gender equality and education quality.*

**Keywords:** gender equality, access, quality, learning achievement, equity, empowerment

### **Introduction**

Girls' participation in education has increased significantly in the past twenty years. Nepali society is patriarchal, which has resulted in gender inequality and disparity in every sector like health, education, economy, politics, governance, etc. Moreover, social and cultural beliefs and the role of women in the family have created a huge barrier to girls' access to education and learning. Bista (2004) stated that discriminatory values and norms against girls are deeply rooted in Nepali culture and society. The traditional belief system of Nepali society has perceived girls as someone else's property. As presented in data, the gender parity index in education has been achieved, but the enrollment of disadvantaged girls is still problematic. According to the Center for Education and Human Resource Development (CEHRD) (2019), the gross enrollment rates in Early Child Education are 85.1% and 87.5% for girls and boys respectively. Similarly, the gap between the girls' and boys' enrollment rate is higher in basic and secondary education, respectively.

The government of Nepal has initiated free basic education, various types of scholarship, free textbooks, provision of female teachers in primary schools, separate toilets for girls, free sanitary pad distribution to adolescent girls, and so on to increase girls' participation in school education. The result of the various programmes and initiation for girls' participation

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*Siddhajyoti Interdisciplinary Journal (Peer reviewed), Volume 3, January, 2022*

in education has improved significantly in the last twenty years Net Enrollment Rate (NER) increased by 74.6 in 2000 to 96.9 in 2020 (Ministry of Education and Sports 2003; Ministry of Finance [MOF], 2021). However, the disparity exists among different strata and as a consequence, a huge gap exists in learning achievement between the boys and girls. Student learning achievement is the core function of the formal education system. It is the final outcome of the whole education system and teaching-learning process. And thus, better learning achievement represents better education quality. However, girls learning achievement in school education is lower compared with the boys.

As a member state of the United Nations, Nepal has agreed to achieve sustainable goals by 2030. The sustainable development goals are targeted to achieve gender equality. To achieve these goals, huge efforts and resources have been put in place. The United States millennium development goals 2001-2015 had focused on access to universal education. Similarly, the declaration of Education for All (EFA) targeted to achieve gender equality in enrollment by 2015. Then, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 2016-2030 have also focused on education quality and gender equality.

The main purpose of this article is to explore the disparity of girls' participation and learning achievement in school education (up to Grade 10) in Nepal. The secondary data has been analyzed to fulfil the objective. Data (both published and unpublished) have been collected from the CEHRD and the National Examination Board (NEB) and presented in different tables and figures accordingly.

### **Education System of Nepal**

The school education in Nepal is mainly divided into two levels: basic (grade 1 to 8) and secondary (grade 9 to 12) (Nepal Law Commission, 2019). Besides, one-year early childhood education has been provided by community schools, institutional schools, and institutional early child care centers. However, institutional schools have more years than community; two or three years. Mainly, two kinds of schools (viz. community and institutional) are providing school education. Institutional schools are operated by a person or group of people or company and they charge fees and hence have a profit motive. Most of the institutional schools are located in urban areas, and students normally come from privileged families (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology [MOEST], 2018). In general, students from institutional schools achieve more scores in examinations than public school students. So, parents try to send their children to institutional schools. Sending the children to institutional school has been taken as prestige in society to some extent.

Three public examinations are conducted in school education, one each at grades 8, 10, and 12. To get enrollment in grades 9, 11, and higher education, students need to get a certain grade point average in each of these examinations. The National Examination Board is responsible for conducting grade 10 and grade 12 examinations while the local governments (rural municipalities and municipalities) conduct grade 8 examinations. This study has focused on grade 10 examination results to compare the girls' learning achievement. Based on the grade 10 examination performance, students are screened for different subjects to study in grade 11.

This article aims to find out the girls' participation status in school education and their learning achievement in secondary education examinations. Similarly, the article also

explores the ways forward to increase girls' participation and learning achievement. To accomplish the purpose, the following research questions are set:

- a. What is the status of girls' participation in school education in Nepal?
- b. What is the status of girls' learning achievement in secondary education examinations?
- c. What are the possible ways to increase girls' participation and learning achievement?

#### **Literature Review**

Article 31 of the constitution of Nepal 2015 has mentioned that education is a fundamental right. All citizens have the right to get free and compulsory basic and free secondary education. However, due to the lack of adequate investment, it has not been implemented in reality. Schools are collecting money from students in most of the cases in public schools. Similarly, article 39 has mentioned that women have the right to participate in all agencies of the state as per the principle of proportionate inclusion (Constitution of Nepal, 2015). Moreover, the constitution has made the provision of mandatory representation of 33 percent women in federal parliament, provincial parliament, and local executive councils. The constitution has delegated authority to the local governments to manage education up to the secondary level. It is believed that the local governments design programmes to ensure gender equality and provide quality learning for all girls and students in school. Thus, the local governments can leverage the effort to create gender equality in education.

The National Planning Commission (NPC) (2019) has mentioned so many problems related to women's empowerment and gender equality in the country. These factors are also hindering girls' participation in education and adding barriers to attain good learning achievement. NPC has further stated that misbehavior, illiteracy, violence, sexual harassment, lack of coordination among different agencies, and unavailability of gender-based disaggregated data are the major problems in the sector. In this context, without providing equal quality education to all girls, women empowerment is not possible. Therefore, education is the only means which can contribute to girls' empowerment in various ways. Quality education creates good job opportunities, increases awareness, empowerment, voice, and choice, and enables them to fight for their own rights. Empowerment and human capability (Sen, 1999) are interlinked, which can be strengthened through equal access to quality education.

Initiations and targeted interventions of the government and other development agencies helped achieve the gender parity index (GPI) in school education. The GPI in basic education was 0.99 and secondary education was 1.01 in the academic year 2020 (MOF, 2021). However, the total GPI cannot show the disparity in different groups and strata. The lowest GPI in basic education net enrollment rate has been 0.94 in Madhesh Province. Similarly, the disadvantaged and marginalized community has lower GPI than other privileged communities. The disaggregated data shows that girls from the lowest quintile of socio-economic status and Madhesi and Muslim communities are under-represented in secondary education. Based on this, it can be deduced that the age-long patriarchal system of the society is still hindering girls' participation in education. More girls enrolling in community schools and less in institutional schools indicates the social belief and value system of the Nepali society.

According to the CEHRD (2019), there are so many disparities between the girls and boys in enrollment, drop-out, repetition, and promotion at the national and province levels.

Similarly, there is a huge disparity in learning achievement results in Grades 5 and 8. Moreover, only 15 percent of girls were eligible to study science in grade 11 in 2019 (NEB, 2019). Providing only a small amount of scholarship seems not sufficient to reduce the disparity in real practice. Bista (2004) categorized the different forms of gender disparity in education like "participation, learning conditions, funding, decision making, leadership role, policies and programs, educational materials and examinations, mainstreaming the skills, and commitment" (p. 13). The intensity of the disparity varies. Still, the gap in learning achievement impacted different ways in higher education and employability.

The literacy rate of women influences the girls' education in different ways like sending them to school, involvement in household chores, and continuing education. Education Review Office (2018, 2019) reveals that higher the mother education level, higher the learning achievement of children is. But the literacy rate of women in different strata and groups have a huge gap. According to the Asian Development Bank study report (2010), literacy rate of Tarai Madhesi women is the lowest (36%) and is almost half to the rate for hill and mountain women (63%). The largest gender gap in literacy rates is found among the other castes, with men three times as likely to be literate as women (72% compared with 24%). In the Muslim community, 'men are nearly four times as likely to be literate as women (97% compared with 27%)' (p. 22). This kind of disparity in literacy impacted girls' access to education in the first and then on learning achievement later.

#### **Method and Data Collection**

This article has used secondary data to answer the research questions. The data related to girls' participation have been collected and published by the CEHRD. It collects the school-level data every year and publishes it as a Flash report. Its data collection system is called Integrated Education Management Information System (IEMIS). All schools across the country fill up the datasheet provided by the CEHRD. Therefore, it collects all data at the central level through the IEMIS. Similarly, the data related to girls' learning achievement have been collected from the NEB, which is responsible for conducting the Secondary Education Examination (SEE) at the end of Grade 10. The learning achievement data published by the NEB has been used in this research. The NEB had published the summary data, and the author visited the NEB and made a formal request for getting a few disaggregated data like the number of girls studying science in Grade 11. To answer the research questions about possible ways to increase girls' participation and learning achievement, the researcher has reviewed articles, research reports, publications of government agencies and other relevant literature. To analyze the data, available data have been presented in tables and figures using simple techniques of data analysis like summarize and percentage. Trend analysis has also been applied in some cases. Different literature has been reviewed and executed thematic analysis to explore the possible ways to increase girls' participation and learning achievement. The researcher's own experience was also used to generate the idea.

#### **Result and Discussion**

The data are presented in tables and figures and discussion is made along with tables and figures. The status of girls' participation is presented first and then status of learning achievement is presented. In-depth analysis of the findings has been discussed in a separate section.

### Participation in Early Child Education

Formal school education beginning from one-year early childhood education is called the Early Childhood Education and Development (ECED). In the year 2019, altogether 105,561 children were enrolled in the ECED programmes. Compared with the 2015 data, the enrollment growth rate of the ECED was 3.1 but this growth rate had a huge disparity (1.9% girls' and 4.2% boys'). The enrollment disparity seems higher in Province No.2 where the girls' enrollment has not increased at all (0%) and boys' increased by 3.4%, whereas in Karnali, girls' enrollment has increased by 4.9% and boys' by 7.1% (CEHRD, 2019). This indicates that parents are not still ready to send their girls to the ECED programmes. Moreover, community school based ECED have limited facilities for playing and other classroom activities for the children which could be the one reason of it.

### Participation in Basic Education

Basic level education (Grade 1-8) has been divided into two levels - lower basic (grade 1-5) and upper basic (grade 6 – 8). There are no such huge differences in total enrollment in basic education by gender. As per the population structure, the female population is more (3.01%) than the male (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2011). The gender disparity is found in Net Enrollment Rate-NER in total as well as by province. In total, girls' NER is 93.1 and boys' 94.8. Compared with the 2015 data, girls' NER is higher than boys' by 0.4 points (89.6 for girls and 89.2 for boys). The girls and boys NER in Madhesh Province were 86.4 and 88.8, respectively and in Lumbini Province, 92.7 and 95.3 for girls' and boys' respectively (CEHRD, 2019). The disparity could be found more in caste and district base but the disaggregated data are not available.

As mentioned above, institutional and community schools are providing school education in Nepal. In total, 18% of schools are institutional, of which the highest are in Bagmati (27%) and lowest in Karnali (6%) province. Almost all institutional schools have used the English language as a medium of instruction. Institutional schools have become the identification of representing high-class people's children. Rich and privilege parents can afford the institutional school fees for their children. So, most of the institutional schools are situated in urban areas. The enrollment status of girls in institutional schools is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. *Percentage of Girls and Boys in Institutional and Community Schools (Basic Level 1-8)*

Year	Community		Institutional	
	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys
2015	51%	49%	44%	56%
2019	53%	47%	42%	58%

(Source: Flash Report 2015 and 2019)

Table 1 shows that higher number of girls are studying in community schools than in the institutional schools. It indicates the social belief system and the discrimination between girls and boys when sending them to schools. Some examples can be found of the families sending their sons to an institutional school and daughters to a community school. According to the CEHRD IEMIS data, 53% girls were enrolled in community schools and only 42%

were in institutional schools in the academic year 2019 (CEHRD, 2020). The disparity in enrollment can be found based on the caste and ethnicity and geographical region as well.

### **Girls' Participation in Secondary Education**

Secondary education has also been divided into two levels; secondary (grade 9 – 10) and secondary (grade 11 – 12). Girls' enrollment in secondary education has been found higher than the boys. In simple terms, it is a good indication from the gender perspective. This phenomenon has various causes and consequences. According to the data, the drop-out rate of the boys is going to increase with increasing the Grade like 5.3 in grade 8 and 4.0 in grade 9. Similarly, girls' drop-out rate is low comparing with boys like 4.6 in Grade 8 and 3.3 in Grade 9 (CEHRD, 2019). Though the girls' learning achievement is found lower compared with the boys, their participation in secondary level has various disparities among different group. As the Grade level increases, girls' dropout also increases but the rate is low in comparison to boys. Similarly, the dropout rate is also higher in the disadvantaged families than the privileged ones. Such disparities can also be found in different geographical regions and ecological belts as well.

Girls' enrollment in institutional schools is found very low compared with their counterparts as similar to basic education. Table 2 presents girls' and boys' enrollment at the secondary level in community and institutional schools.

Table 2. *Percentage of Girls and Boys in Institutional and Community School (Secondary Level 9-10)*

Year	Community		Institutional	
	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys
2015	53%	47%	44%	56%
2019	53%	47%	42%	58%

(Source: Flash Report 2015 and 2019)

Table 2 shows, girls' participation in institutional schools has been found lower than in the community schools. It indicates that the social discrimination and the gender bias in education are still remaining. This limit the higher education opportunity for girls. Students from institutional schools perform better in comparison to the public schools. As a result, they get more chance to enroll in technical higher education. To study the Science subject in Grade 11, students should obtain at least C+ grade point in Grade 10 secondary education examination in Science and Mathematics.

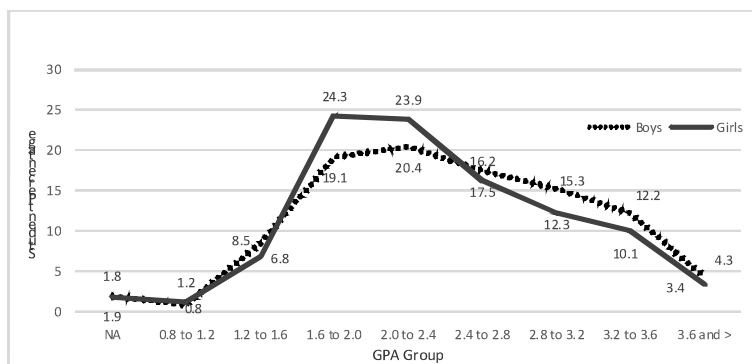
### **Status of Girls' Learning Achievement**

Learning achievement has been taken as an important outcome of the formal education system. To measure the learning achievement, a formal examination is the most popular method all over the world. The learning achievement is taken as the indicator of the learning level which determines the students' class upgrading, certification and other educational decisions. The examination practice can vary in different education systems and at various levels. In Nepal, the examination conducted at the end of grade 10 is taken as the most important one. Some students stop their further education after completing Grade 10 and enter into the labor market. The students who go for further study choose different subjects in grade 11 as per their interest and performance in the Grade 10 examination. The students who get a good grade point average can get enrollment in science stream in grade 11, while

students who cannot get a good grade point average should choose general subjects like; humanities, education, and management. Studying general subjects in grade 11 is perceived to limit the opportunity to get better higher education and employability opportunity (Acharya, 2021).

The gap between boys and girls has narrowed in terms of participation, whereas a huge gap has been noticed in learning achievement. Similarly, a huge disparity has been found in the enrollment in science and technology and vocational education in Grade 11. Learning disparity is not only in upper grades, it has started from early grades. Early Grade Reading Assessment (2014) shows that 39% of girls of grade 2 were not able to read a single word whereas the corresponding figure was only 34% for boys (USAID, 2014). Data shows that the learning achievement has been widening as grade increases. According to the Education Review Office (2018), huge gaps in learning achievement by girls and boys exist in science and mathematics. It further states that girls' learning achievement scale score is lower by 5 points than boys in science and 10 points in mathematics.

The learning achievement of Grade 10 is published as Grade Point Average (GPA) categorized into nine groups. According to the letter grading system, the letter 'A' denotes the highest level of achievement whereas 'D' denotes the lowest (Curriculum Development Center, 2017). When the girls' and boys' data are disaggregated based on their grade point average, 58% of girls are poor in learning, they are under the lower group of grade point average (National Examination Board, 2019). Figure 1 shows the difference in learning by gender. *Figure 1. Grade Point Average Distribution in Grade 10 Examinations by Gender*



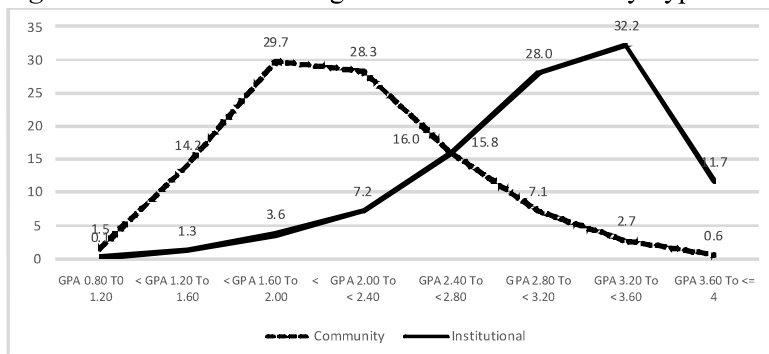
(Source: National Examination Board, 2019)

As shown in Figure 1, girls' learning achievement is lower than the boys' in upper range of grade point average. According to the grade point average explanation, the grade point average more than 2.4 is good, 2.8 is very good, 3.2 is excellent and 3.6 is outstanding. The girl's percentage of this group (2.4 and above) is lower than the boys and more girls are in group 2.0 to 2.4 which is just acceptable level of learning (Curriculum Development Center, 2016).

The learning disparity can be seen more clearly in the type of schools. The majority of girls from institutional schools are found performing better than the girls from community schools. The data shows that 73% of girls from community schools fall under the lowest five groups of GPA, when only 12 percent of girls from institutional schools are in the same category. Similarly, only 10 percent girls from community schools fall under the upper three

groups of GPA whereas 71 percent girls from the institutional schools occupy those groups. Further detail is presented in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2. Grade Point Average Distribution of Girls by Type of School



(Source: National Examination Board, 2019)

As presented in Figure 2, girls who are from urban and privileged families have more chances to get better learning achievement in the grade 10 examination which leads to better opportunities for the future education and career opportunities. The fact is that more than 75% percent girls from community schools are not able to get better learning achievement. The grade point average group 1.6 to 2.0 has 30 percent girls, this is just a partially acceptable level of learning. Conversely, 32 percent girls from institutional schools are in the group 3.2 to 3.6 which is categorized as an excellent level of learning.

The students who secure low GPA are not allowed to study science in Grade 11. The percentage of low GPA achieving girls are more than boys. Thus, the overall girls' enrollment in science in grade 11 is about 35 percent (NEB, 2019). Out of the total 35 percent girls' studying the science subject, less than five percent are from the community school. It shows that girls from community schools achieve low GPA and thus are not eligible to get enrolled in science. Nevertheless, the students who achieve low grade point average in grade 10 can enroll in education stream in Grade 11. As a result, more than 60 percent girls have enrolled in the education faculty in Bachelor level in the academic year 2019 (University Grants Commission, 2020). The learning disparity is reflected and translated into gender differences in professional and occupational life and ultimately into the difference in productivity and earnings: differences in occupation and sector of employment (World Bank, 2012). Acharya (2021) stated, low participation in science is believed to limit the opportunity in higher education as well as job market.

### Discussion

Girls are still facing the greatest barriers to learn in school in various ways. The enrollment percentage of the girls in community and institutional schools, learning achievement gaps in the type of school, drop-out rate, NER, social-cultural, economic, political, geographical and other many factors have been found as barriers to girls' access to education and learning achievement. The intensity of the problem is found more in community schools in rural areas. There might be several reasons behind it. However, some school factors are also responsible for it. The teacher behaviour and statements targeted to girls do not motivate them to continue education and learning. Poudel (personal communication, 2021/6/5), stated



it,"My teacher in the classroom always told us that educating the girls is only for the certificate for marriage.". The overall situation has not improved till now in many schools, although some scenario has changed.

There are so many hindrances behind the low level of learning achievement and equal participation. The data presented above show the disparity in participation and learning achievement. In this regard, Acharya et al. (2003) revealed the problems associated with gender discrimination in education, gender-based, caste-based taboos, language difficulties and economic hardship of families, non-applicable knowledge and skills, learning environment of the school, and learning materials discourage girls to school and learning. It means girls are not getting adequate learning opportunities in school in terms of quality. Moreover, individual feedback and support system in school is weak. It has resulted in the limited scope of girls' employment and further career.

Girls do not attend school during the menstruation period in various rural schools. Though there is a policy provision of separate toilets for girls, there is no proper management with adequate water and sanitation facility in many schools. The government has recently started free sanitary pad distribution, but there is still a problem in its management.

Nothing should bar any human beings from the advantages of education. UNESCO (2016) mentioned that better education leads to greater prosperity, better health, better income, less domestic violence, more gender equality, higher social capital, and protect the environment. The cumulative impact of education is quality of life with human dignity. So, providing equal opportunity to participation as well as learning is important for both girls and boys. Therefore, only the GPI in terms of the number of girls in school compared with the boys is not sufficient for the equality in education. Total NER and GPI seem not different in boys and girls but among the different groups and learning achievement, a huge disparity can be seen. Equality in education is much more important than just having the same or a greater number of girls in school. Moreover, there should be an equal learning opportunity. Better learning opportunity fosters better human capability and freedom as mentioned by Sen (2000).

Nepal has improved girls' enrollment in education through various efforts but the disparity in learning is still there. A low level of learning achievement is not only the barrier to better higher education but it also leads to other impacts like early marriage, forced school dropout and more involvement in household chores. According to the data, the participation of girls in school education seems not problematic. While the data analysis goes at a deeper level, a huge disparity is found in girls' participation as well. Girls from disadvantaged groups are in community schools and privilege zones are in institutional schools. The girls' participation in education is found severely problematic in Province No. 2 as well. Acharya (2021) stated that the disparities in education by different groups lead towards other social, economic, political disparities in the longterm. The social disparities also hinder social cohesion and unity.

The learning achievement of girls is found very low compared with the boys' and a huge disparity between the types of schools is also found. It is a well established fact that institutional school students' achievement is higher than that of the community school students. Moreover, participation of girls in institutional schools is lower than the boys. In total, more girls are in the community schools. It means, more girls in community school lead to low achievement. There might be several reasons but the weak learning achievement of community

school creates multiple effects on girls' empowerment. It creates disparity in enrollment in Grade 11 and in the choices of subjects to study.

#### **Way Forward**

To overcome the barriers of girls' participation and learning achievement in education, evidence-based policy, programs and interventions are necessary. As mentioned by International Institute for Education Planning (2019), our policy has also been formulated in dark and vacuum. The disaggregated data are not available and used to formulate the policy and programmes. The programme implementation and interventions are starting as one-size-fits-all. So, the disaggregated data and data-driven policy formulation are important to overcome the barriers.

Teacher behaviour in the classroom and teaching learning activities should also change to bring about better learning achievement of girls. Most of the classrooms discourage the students whose learning is weak. The traditional teachers rarely encourage girls to learn more, be empowered and be something, rather they just tell 'you are not for longer education'. The schools need to improve gender-friendly environment not only in the physical but also social-emotional and behavioral aspects as well.

Learning achievement data should be analyzed from the early grades and special attention should be given to low achiever girls. Family awareness, parenting, and other community-based advocacy should be mobilized for better education of girls. The local governments should pay special attention to girls' equal participation and learning opportunities. To increase the participation of girls from disadvantaged families, bearing the opportunity cost by the local government would be supportive. The adequate amount of scholarship and other facilities may also encourage the target groups. Better learning achievement can enhance the opportunity and empowerment.

Evidence based programme intervention is important and disaggregated data should be developed to address the problem. Very few data are available regarding girls' learning achievement and the available data are not in one place. Different agencies collect and publish the data differently. In this context, it is important to develop a disaggregated database and to make it available in one place. The NEB published the data by sex in 2019 but not in 2018. Similarly, in 2015, it published the data by sex and type of school but in 2019, it published the data only by sex, but not by the type of school. It proves that there is no systematic practice of using the data for policy formulation. So, disaggregated database policy or guideline should be developed and implemented. It helps to portray the real picture of girls' participation and learning achievement. As a corollary, it supports in developing policy and implementing the intervention to reduce the disparity in participation and learning achievement.

#### **Conclusion**

To make the country prosperous, happy and peaceful, achieving the gender equality is important. Providing girls with equal opportunity is not sufficient to enroll and retain them in schools. There are so many disparities in girls' participation in school education among the different groups. Achieving gender equality is also the global development agenda. To ensure gender equality in education, girls' learning achievement and equal opportunity to learn is also the subject to consider. A small amount of scholarship, one-size-fits-all programme intervention cannot be sufficient to address the issues of participation and achievement. So, the different levels of government should develop contextual programmes and try to avoid a

basket approach. Creating girls-friendly physical classrooms and learning environment in the school is important. To change the social-cultural belief system and avoiding other hindrances, the entire school family (head teacher, teacher, school management committee and parents) should be responsible. The disaggregated data should be collected and made available for the public which can create the pressure to implement some targeted interventions. Only making the laws against discriminatory will not be effective in society. Targeted interventions and awareness raising are needed at the community level.

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