Why emotions matter
Promoting female teachers and gender-transformative social-emotional learning in Nepal

20 YEARS

Center for
Universal
Education
at BROOKINGS

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Executive summary

Access to education is directly connected to the general well-being, social and emotional learning, and mental health of adolescents. Many adolescent girls in Nepal, however, appear to be left out of this "virtuous" cycle, unable to find space in school to meaningfully develop a sense of relatedness, autonomy, and competency. More than 8 out of 10 adolescent girls who leave school report doing so because of the emotional strain of the socio-cultural challenges that come from living at the intersection of poverty and gendered social norms (USAID, 2017). Female teachers have a critical role to play in gender-transformative social-emotional learning (SEL) that could support adolescent girls navigating inequities in their communities, yet for years Nepali teachers have reported a lack of SEL skills and preparation needed to play this role for their students. Grappling with similar challenging contexts, female teachers themselves report feeling out of place and disconnected, with a diminished sense of agency, and less competent to manage their own social-emotional needs. As the Nepali government seeks to prioritize both gender equity and SEL, how can policy and practice better support female teachers to promote adolescent girls' transformative SEL needs?

This policy brief presents findings from mixed-method research conducted in seven schools and two residential learning centers from three districts (Kathmandu, Lalitpur, and Kavrepalanchowk) of Bagmati province. It seeks to understand the socio-emotional needs of adolescent girls in Nepal, the role of female teachers in addressing those needs, and the support teachers themselves are (or are not) receiving to play this role. It also provides policy recommendations to aid female secondary school teachers in meeting their social-emotional needs in order to ensure their support for their adolescent girl students.

Local governments can play a pivotal role in developing a shared vision and plan to promote transformative SEL by bringing in multiple stakeholders to build commitment and coordinated efforts. Given the low sense of agency expressed by female teachers, it is critical that they develop confidence in their values and belief systems and explore innovative ideas to improve their pedagogical practices. In order to ensure gender equity in education in Nepal, female teachers must be engaged, equipped, and enabled to reach the students who need them most.

I. Introduction

An increasing body of evidence points to the critical need to focus on young people's resilience and emotional well-being, especially given the challenges presented (and exacerbated) by the COVID-19 pandemic. Educators across the globe have found it daunting to navigate the gravity of overcoming the trauma endured by students wracked by anxiety, grief, uncertainty, isolation, and confusion (Walker, 2020; Zieher et al., 2021). Given the already existing structural and socio-economic inequalities, the impact of COVID-19 was particularly strong on adolescent girls from low- and middle-income countries (Nagaraj et al., 2022), not only on their educational outcomes, but also in reinforcing existing gender inequalities.

In Nepal, even prior to the COVID pandemic, adolescents—who make up 24 percent of the population (CBS, 2014)—have consistently faced challenges related to violence and injury, early marriage, substance abuse, and sexual and reproductive health (Pokhrel, 2021).
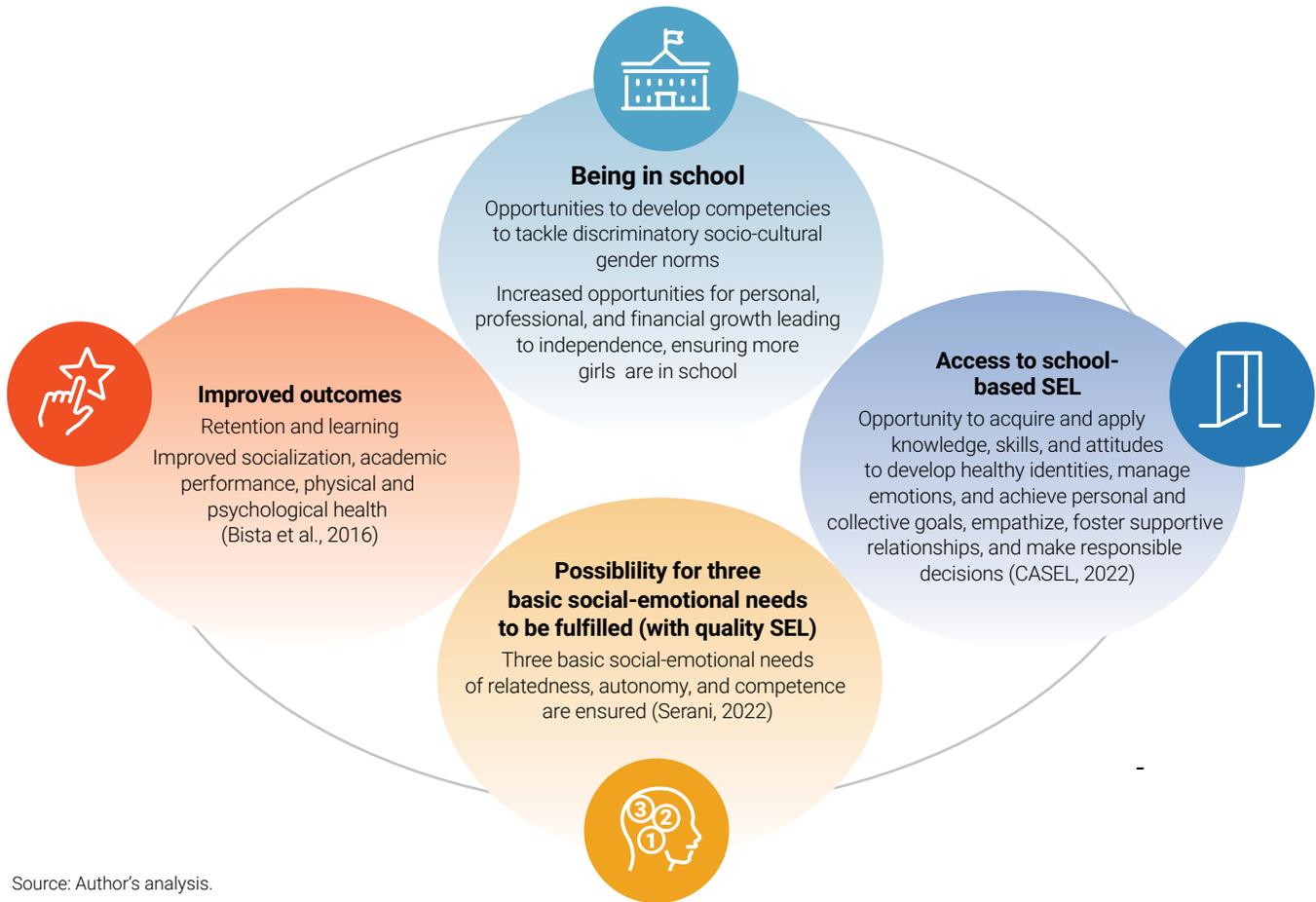
24%
of total population are adolescents
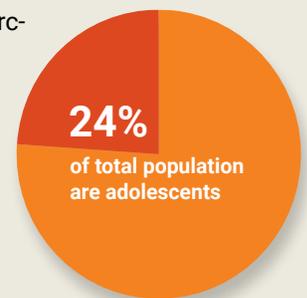
The financial uncertainty brought about by the pandemic has added to these existing structural challenges. As one-third of Nepal's population was pushed back into poverty (on $0.50 per day), adolescents, especially girls, have been pushed into child marriage, sexual violence, and other forms of exploitation (Strauss, 2020).

Further, as a result of school closures during COVID-19, an estimated 2.2 million additional children are at risk of not being able to complete their education unless they receive targeted support (UNICEF, 2021). School dropout has always been a challenge for Nepal, with less than a third of all students making it to grade 12, the final year of school education (Ghimire, 2021). Gender has been the single strongest determinant of school participation among adolescents, and most of those who leave school early are girls (World Bank, 2020), a pattern that was repeated during the pandemic (Kathmandu Post, 2020).
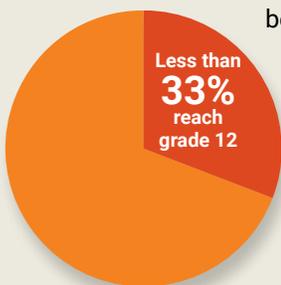
Less than 33% reach grade 12

Access to education is directly connected to the general well-being, social and emotional learning, and mental health of adolescents (Tarricone et al., 2021). Large-scale disruptions to education by emergency events like COVID-19, therefore, not only lead to "learning loss" (Kuhfeld et al., 2022), but also negatively affect the emotional well-being of young people (Tarricone et al., 2021). Evidence shows that there is a strong positive relationship between social-emotional learning (SEL) and academic achievement (Shrestha et al., 2021). Access to schooling is important for social-emotional health, which in turn supports learning, leading to a sort of "virtuous" cycle (see figure 1).

FIGURE 1. SEL in school can support improved well-being and educational outcomes

Being in school
Opportunities to develop competencies to tackle discriminatory socio-cultural gender norms

Increased opportunities for personal, professional, and financial growth leading to independence, ensuring more girls are in school

Improved outcomes
Retention and learning
Improved socialization, academic performance, physical and psychological health (Bista et al., 2016)

Access to school-based SEL
Opportunity to acquire and apply knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions, and achieve personal and collective goals, empathize, foster supportive relationships, and make responsible decisions (CASEL, 2022)

Possiblility for three basic social-emotional needs to be fulfilled (with quality SEL)
Three basic social-emotional needs of relatedness, autonomy, and competence are ensured (Serani, 2022)

Source: Author's analysis.

Many adolescent girls in Nepal, however, appear to be left out of this "virtuous" cycle. The gender-sensitive school environment report of 2021 (Room to Read Girls' Education Program), for example, revealed that girls in Nepal remain less likely than boys to complete secondary school, with an increased risk of dropout beginning in early adolescence mostly because of the barriers associated with emotional and mental well-being. That is, school often does not support their well-being or help them to develop needed social-emotional skills to navigate the challenges of structural inequality and gender discrimination. Similarly, a 2017 study found that more than 80 percent of adolescent girls who leave school report doing so as a result of the increase in emotional vulnerability brought upon them by economic strains and sociocultural norms like forced marriage, excessive household work, menstruation, harassment, and trafficking (USAID, 2017).

Transformative social-emotional learning (TSEL) holds the promise to eliminate these barriers, permitting girls to reap both the academic benefits as well as those associated with emotional and mental well-being in school. TSEL interventions that include gender-transformative content have been shown to support educational equity by helping to reduce the consequences of gender disparities in both the short and long term. Outcomes of TSEL include retention of adolescent girls in school, heightened aspirations, decreased likelihood of violence, improved well-being, and improved academic achievement (CASEL, 2022).

Key to TSEL programs are teachers who themselves have opportunities to strengthen their own emotional literacy, examine and reflect critically on the roots of inequity, and foster collaborative solutions to community and societal problems. Evidence from Ghana and India, for example, has shown that investing in teachers' SEL improves key dimensions of classroom quality as well as teacher-student relationships, leading to improved holistic development for students (Ahmad-Gul, 2015; Wolf et al., 2018). Teacher optimism, positive teacher-student relationships, and students' feelings of relatedness and belonging with their teach-

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ers help motivate young people toward academics and school engagement and support social-emotional well-being and the development of competencies and autonomy in school (Eccles and Roeser, 2011).

Teachers are critical to the development of SEL among their adolescent students in general, and female teachers in particular have a critical role to play in gender-transformative SEL, supporting adolescent girls navigating inequities in their communities in both learning and other outcomes, especially in low- and middle-income countries (Evans and Nestour, 2019). A recent study among adolescent Nepali students revealed, for example, that girls who are taught by female teachers demonstrated greater academic and holistic growth (Joshi et al., 2022).

Yet for years Nepali teachers, especially female teachers, have reported a lack of SEL skills, preparation, and support needed to play this role for their students (UNESCO, 2006). Hailing from the same contexts as their students, female teachers are likely

to face similar issues related to systemic gender inequality and discriminatory social norms as their female students and may not be able to see another path down which to lead girls.

Unfortunately, not enough attention has been paid to fostering SEL competencies among female teachers in Nepal and little has been done to address the gap between what is expected from them and the insufficient support they receive to meet these expectations. Based on our own research, it has become clear that to ensure gender equity in education in Nepal, it is imperative that we support the emotional literacy of female teachers, especially those teaching at the secondary level, so that they feel a sense of belonging, have agency, and develop the competencies needed to support the emotional well-being of adolescent girls. This brief presents the findings of this research, which seeks to understand the socio-emotional needs of adolescent girls in Nepal, the role of female teachers in addressing those needs, and the support teachers themselves are (or are not) receiving to play this role.

II. Context

Fostering SEL competencies in schools means keeping students' well-being at the center. Working on well-being alone will not solve the long-standing and deep-seated gender inequities prevalent in the education system of Nepal, but transformative SEL can help promote educational equity as it promotes empathy, examines biases, and fosters critical reflection in the construction of inclusive school communities (Jagers et al., 2019).

Essential to this process is teachers' well-being, which does not mean the absence of negative emotions and stress but is rather about helping teachers to manage these challenges in healthy ways that support their personal and professional growth (Forster et al., 2022). To explore the relationship between the social-emotional needs of adolescent girls and their female teachers, we conducted research guided by three questions:

- What are the social-emotional needs of adolescent girls in Nepal?

- What is the role of female teachers in meeting those needs?

- What support do female teachers have and need in order to fulfill that role and fully support the transformative social-emotional learning of adolescent girls in Nepal?

Before delving into the answer to these questions, it is first necessary to understand (1) existing policies related to gender equity in Nepal and the longstanding challenges to ensure their effective implementation, (2) how limited engagement of women as secondary teachers further affects the execution of existing policies, and (3) why female teachers are often unable to contribute to the social-emotional needs of adolescent girls and the existing SEL plans and policies that address these concerns.

A. GENDER EQUITY: A COMMITMENT ON PAPER, BUT NOT IN PRACTICE

With the promulgation of the new constitution in 2015, gender equity became a top-stated policy priority of the Nepal government. The Eighth Amendment of the Education Act of 2016 addressed gender-inclusive governance and called for 33 percent of parliamentary seats to be held by women. The country has since seen some positive change, especially in the representation of women in politics. In the 2017 elections, for the first time female elected officials made up 41 percent of local government and 33 percent of provincial and federal parliament.

Moreover, the School Sector Development Plan (SSDP) 2016-2023 stated that equity was a key dimension in terms of access, participation, and learning outcomes. The government has implemented special scholarships to encourage adolescent girls to stay in school, currently providing Rupees 400 ($5) per year to girls who continue to study in grade eight and Rupees 500 ($6) in grades nine and ten.

Despite this progress, over the past decade, Nepal has consistently scored in the bottom quarter of countries on international rankings of gender equality. While Nepal ranked 96 out of 146 countries within the Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI) 2022, the rankings vary drastically under the four dimensions of this benchmark (See Figure 2).

Multiple forms of disadvantage against women at the family and community level as well as within the broader economic and socio-cultural systems have made it difficult for women to have active and full participation in leadership roles (see Table 1).

FIGURE 2. Global Gender Gap Index 2022

NEPAL GLOBAL GENDER GAP INDEX	109 Health and Survival	125 Educational Attainment	58 Political Empowerment	98 Economic Participation

Source: World Economic Forum, 2022.

TABLE 1. Barriers that limit women's participation in leadership roles

|	
Child marriage	Though the legal marriage age in Nepal is 20, close to 40 percent of girls under the age of 18 are married (Logan and Maharjan, 2020). With COVID, this number is expected to rise (UNFPA, 2020).
Adolescent pregnancy	Nepal has the second highest rate (17 percent) of pregnancy among 15- to 19-year-olds in South Asia (Shahabuddin et al., 2019).
Discriminatory social practices	*Chhaupadi,* a system that considers menstruation a taboo and prohibits women from participating in normal family and social activities, was banned by the Supreme Court in 2005. In 2017, the national parliament criminalized the practice, stipulating a three-month jail sentence or a 3,000 rupee fine ($22.98), or both, for anyone forcing a woman to follow the custom. Nonetheless, the practice persists.
Gender-based violence	In 2016, 11 percent of women between the ages of 15 and 49 reported experiencing physical or sexual abuse from a current or former intimate partner in the preceding 12 months.
Migration of men and youth	Between 2008 and 2018, over four million Nepali workers received government permits to pursue foreign employment; more than 90 percent of migrants were men. Though some women may gain access to the economic and social resources made available during men's absence, their opportunities are often constrained by their increased role in the households (Karnikar, 2020).

> Key to TSEL programs are teachers who themselves have opportunities to strengthen their own emotional literacy, examine and reflect critically on the roots of inequity, and foster collaborative solutions to community and societal problems.

Though access to education and opportunities for women in multiple sectors including politics have increased, bringing shifts in gender dynamics, these social and political changes have been unevenly distributed (Adhikari and Sharma, 2022). The layers of intersectional inequalities prevail within society, and women have a culturally prescribed role that often does not allow them to rise above their social order or fully exercise their agency. Further, with the loss of jobs and income reduction brought on by the pandemic and the continued existence of gender-segregated labor markets, their participation is often limited to meeting care and household needs within the home. Around two million people lost their jobs due to the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to an extreme reduction in personal and family income, threatening the Nepal government's commitment to gender equity in education (Joshi et al., 2021).

B. ENGAGEMENT OF WOMEN AS TEACHERS IN NEPAL: STILL A LONG WAY TO GO IN TERMS OF AUTONOMY

The engagement of women as teachers is one of the most powerful means to achieve gender equity (Adhikari and Adhikari, 2021). Over the last two decades, research has shown the significance of female teachers to educational outcomes for girls in Nepal. Parents have reported feeling more comfortable, for example, sending their girls to school with female teachers (UNESCO, 2006). This is reflected in the national policy passed in 1956, and still in place today, to prioritize the recruitment of women particularly at the primary level to increase enrollment and reduce dropout among girls (Ministry of Education, 1997). More recent policies also seek to ensure an increase in the development of female teachers at the primary level, such as the School Sector Reform Plan (SSRP) of 2009.

FIGURE 3. Percentage of female teachers in different education levels in community schools of Nepal
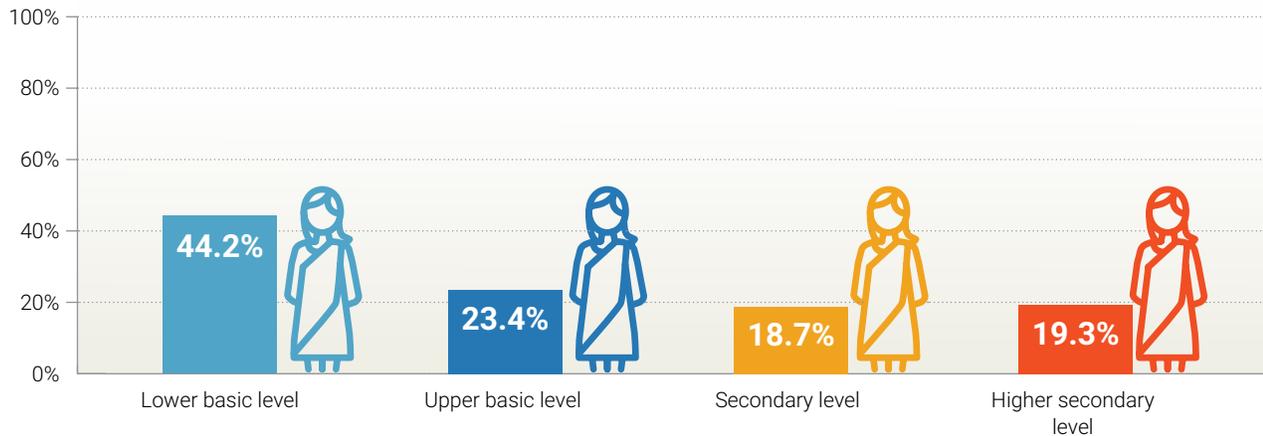
Source: Government of Nepal Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2020.

As women's participation has increased in Nepal's primary schools, the gender gap among students in primary education has reduced. The presence of women teachers has also reinforced the positive influence of girls' education on their interpersonal as well as academic achievement at this level (Shtri Shakti, 2011 as cited in Gurung, 2016). However, less attention has been given to the importance of promoting women's autonomous and active engagement at the secondary level, where the number of female teachers has been more limited (see figure 3).

The low participation rate of women in higher levels of education has created challenges to the construction of conducive environments and supportive mechanisms to foster the engagement of girls, especially adolescent girls (Adhikari and Adhikari, 2021). The few women who are in these positions may either carry long-held patriarchal mindsets themselves or—outnumbered by men—be bound to listen to and follow the decisions of male figures, which are guided by their patriarchal societal beliefs and ethics (Adhikari and Adhikari, 2021). Female teachers in Nepal's secondary schools often lack significant participation, especially in decision making, because their voices are either silenced by single-handed decisions of male head teachers or because of the lack of understanding of female teachers about their role in the decision-making process (Dhakal, 2021; Ryan, 2007).

Active engagement requires that individuals have agency and autonomy to choose their roles, make use of their decision-making power, and voice their perspectives. Most women operate within the framework of the mainstream social norms in which they were brought up. Without deliberate attention, and spaces for critical reflection, women may find it difficult to acknowledge

their narratives and their potential to lead, making it challenging to thrive in their role as teachers themselves or support their adolescent girl students. Given the persistent socio-cultural and economic barriers they encounter (Adhikari and Adhikari, 2021; Dhakal, 2021), female teachers themselves need personal and professional development (Khadka, 2020), especially to work on their self-esteem and professional identity to support their active engagement in ensuring gender equity.

C. ENSURING TEACHERS' COMPETENCY: LACK OF SUPPORT FOR THE EMOTIONAL LITERACY OF FEMALE TEACHERS

Throughout the years, teacher professional development (TPD) has been included as one of the essential components of national educational plans, and policies in Nepal (for example: National Education System Plan, 1971; Teacher Education Project, 2001; Secondary Education Support Project, 2003; and the School Sector Reform Plan, 2009). However, there are serious concerns about the reach and quality of TPD at the secondary level. Over a third of secondary teachers are yet to be trained (See Table 2), and there is a noticeable gap in TPD participation between female and male teachers.

Female teachers have reported invisible barriers to their professional development that lead to them not receiving support to develop skills and competencies to manage themselves in a context where they go through excessive emotional labor and burden from additional responsibilities (Khadka, 2020; Shrestha, 2021). Further, the TPD opportunities provided do not fulfill teachers' needs for SEL competency in particular (Poudel, 2022). Comprehensive SEL training is not yet available for teach-

> "I feel guilty that I don't know what to do when students open up with such issues, only counseling doesn't help and I don't know any other measures as a teacher that I could connect her to."

TABLE 2. Participation of secondary school teachers in TPD, community schools, 2019–20

	FEMALE	MALE	TOTAL
Total teachers	3,653	15,961	19,614
Trained with TPD	2,312	12,112	14,424
% trained with TPD	63.3%	75.9%	73.5%

Source: Government of Nepal Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology, 2020

ers in Nepal. The government identified Cognitive, Social, and Emotional learning as central to the School Sector Development Plan, 2016 to 2023, yet the teacher development program does not emphasize these components as such (National Centre for Educational Development, 2016).

Female teachers may be in particular need of such TPD support for TSEL. Given the difference in gender norms and social expectations that adolescent girls face, there are often specific social-emotional needs that require female teachers to be role models. Women teachers need more than curriculum and practice teaching social-emotional skills, rather they need to live it. Just as students need to reflect on their evolving social-emotional skills per the changing times, so do female teachers, who are themselves going through the exhausting fight to establish their professional identity amidst the skepticism of both their male colleagues and students, who often see them as incapable (Pageni, 2021).

However, a study in 2017 revealed that the exposure of female teachers to these training programs is considerably lower than that of male teachers and that none of these trainings had components of SEL (Khanal, 2020). Unless female teachers go through the guided practice themselves, it will be difficult for them to navigate the gender-based challenges that they themselves face as women.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated stress related to both the personal and professional conditions of female teachers, making the need for SEL training more urgent. The sudden transition to online modes of instruction, extra burden of household chores, widespread teacher layoffs, and health-related stress took a toll on most female teachers (Shrestha, 2021). As concerns have started to rise to address the social-emotional needs of students, it is critical to look into what is missing in ensuring teachers' competency to address these needs.

III. Findings

Findings are presented here in three sections: (1) the social-emotional needs of adolescent girls, (2) the role of female teachers in meeting these needs, and (3) the support female teachers have and need in order to fulfill that role and fully support the TSEL of adolescent girls.

These findings are based on mixed-methods research conducted in July and August of 2022 with 249 adolescent girls, 15 female teachers, and 6 school leaders, 3 (2 males and 1 female) principals, 1 (male) vice-principal, and 2 (female) school coordinators in seven secondary-level community schools and two learning centers from three different districts—Kathmandu (Kathmandu Metropolitan City and Budanilkantha Municipality), Lalitpur (Godawari Municipality and Mahalaxmi Municipality), and Kavrepalanchowk (Panchkhal Municipality) districts of Bagmati Province, as well as an extensive review of research and policy documents (see appendix A for more on methodology).

Relevance of SEL: What adolescent girls need

A. CHALLENGES FACING ADOLESCENT GIRLS

Many of the adolescent girls in this study report being discriminated against both at home and school. Within their families, they describe carrying a heavy workload, but being provided less support—including nutritious food—than their brothers. "I don't know how to share this, but I feel sad for being a girl when my grandmother saves food to give to my brothers when I have to do all the housework," expressed a 15-year-old student. At school, the girls reported that boys are provided more opportu-

nities, have greater access to learning materials, and are more frequently invited to ask and answer questions and take on leadership roles.

They shared that the school homework and the workload at home makes them feel frustrated, disoriented, and angry, but they did not feel they knew how to manage these emotions related to feeling excluded in their home and in their schools. With more household work, adolescent girls are frequently left with less time to complete their school-related tasks, making them more prone to corporal punishment and intimidation in their classrooms and ultimately leading to high absenteeism and dropout (Bhattarai et al., 2019). These experiences of gender discrimination in numerous important domains of life have been found to harm the psychological well-being of girls (Mosley and Branscombe, 2021).

Around 52 percent of the girls in our study reported hating themselves and around 64 percent felt that they were not loved by anyone, putting them at greater risk of developing the emotional problems associated with low self-esteem (Xiaojing et al., 2021). One 14-year-old participant explained how she feels her family sees her differently than her brother: over time, as she is given less freedom than her brother, her identity has started to shift and she sees herself as someone who has to continually rely on others, as someone who cannot be independent. Internalizing these thoughts can lead to fatigue, depression, and feelings of being unable to cope with academic responsibilities. Indeed, 85 percent of the girls in our survey reported that they are not able to concentrate on their studies because of fatigue and stress related to the image that their family—as well as friends—have of them.

B. SOCIO-CULTURAL, PHYSICAL, AND EMOTIONAL CHALLENGES RELATED TO MENSTRUATION AND THE NEED FOR SUPPORT

In 2020, the government allocated Rupees 1.82 billion (around $15 million) for the purchase and distribution of free sanitary pads to community schools throughout the country. However, while this is an important step, lack of sanitary pads is not the only challenge for adolescent girls during their menstruation.

> "I don't know how to share this, but I feel sad for being a girl when my grandmother saves food to give to my brothers when I have to do all the housework," expressed a 15-year-old student."

In the Nepali context, the realities of adolescent girls' lives are very restrictive, especially during their menstruation. With the stigma associated with menstruation and cultural practices like menstrual exile, adolescent girls go through psychological distress and are more likely to suffer depression and anxiety as well as other psychological and socio-emotional challenges associated with lack of agency and autonomy (Mukherjee et al., 2020).

The social systems are such that they make adolescent girls feel less positive about themselves, especially in relation to menstruation. In our research, 58 percent of the girls who missed class reported having done so due to "illness," the major reason being menstruation, as they often do not know how to take care of themselves or seek support during menstruation. The vast majority—83 percent of the students surveyed—stated they needed support to understand menstruation, especially the mood swings associated with it.

One 13-year-old girl explained that when she had her first menstruation while at school, she felt unable to share it with any of her teachers during school hours. Meanwhile, no one realized she was having problems. The girls also expressed frustration about being unheard when they talked about emotional problems during their menstruation; they felt that no one, including their female teachers, trusted them or cared about them. The girls were hesitant to ask for a sanitary pad that was already there in the school and chose not to come to school at all because of shame. Not having someone they could talk to within their everyday life was a critical problem in terms of access to the support mechanism offered in the school.
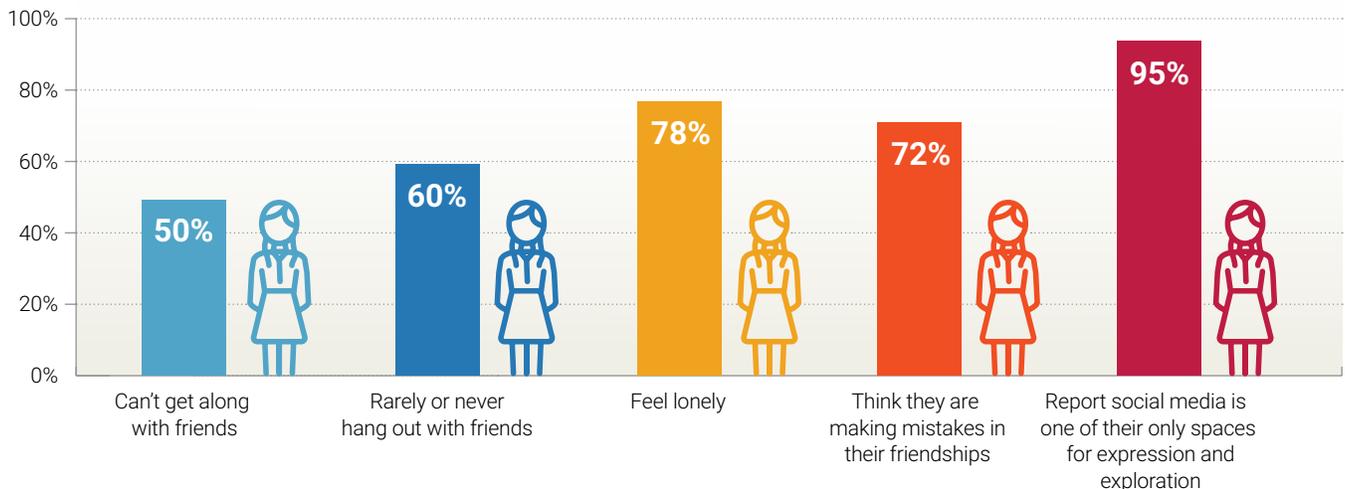
C. ADOLESCENT GIRLS NEED EMOTIONAL SUPPORT TO BUILD HEALTHY INTER-PERSONAL CONNECTIONS

Adolescence is an important period for the development of agency and the skills for effective decision-making. This in turn will help girls nurture the feeling of relatedness. If provided with proper contexts for socialization where they can actively engage during this critical time, girls will be able to develop strong emotional bonds within their relationships, eventually helping them to become socially mature. This is not only central to their well-being but is also considered key to academic success (Ahmed Gul, 2015).

Yet the majority of adolescent girls in this research reported having limited opportunities to socialize with their peers in this way. Reflective of the restrictive socio-cultural settings they inhabit, the girls in this study reported having few friends outside of school and no social groups to share their everyday challenges or even hang out with. Only around half of survey participants reported that they could get along easily with others their age (53%) or that they felt their friends really knew them (47%). Around 60 percent of them stated they rarely or never hung out with friends, and 85% reported that they rarely or never took part in activities outside the home, such as sports, youth clubs or voluntary work.

In focus group discussions, the majority of girls pointed out that they wanted to be more involved in non-academic or extra-curricular activities, primarily as a way to make friends or build connections with other young people. "I wish our school had a science lab and a club through which I could make more friends; the other times I am usually at home helping my parents, so can-

FIGURE 4. **Adolescent girls' reports on inter-personal connections**

Category	Value
Can't get along with friends	50%
Rarely or never hang out with friends	60%
Feel lonely	78%
Think they are making mistakes in their friendships	72%
Report social media is one of their only spaces for expression and exploration	95%

Source: Author's survey data, 2022.

not go out," expressed one of the girls. Indeed, around 78 percent of the girls in our research reported that they had felt lonely at some point in the past two weeks and 72 percent of them think that they keep on making mistakes in their friendships, because of which they find it difficult to foster their bond with their friends.

The girls in this research were eager to receive support from their female teachers, especially because they felt like their teachers might have gone through similar experiences and could help them become competent to help them understand and improve on their social mistakes. However, they complained that their female teachers did not show interest in coaching or counseling them, even when they shared their problems, thus making them more uncomfortable sharing anything further.

With this lack of support, girls in this study often reported relying on social media for relationships and for pleasure, without having a clear understanding of online safety measures. Through their high use of social media, adolescent girls in our study see the changes in the global arena; with other women enjoying their freedom, they realize that change in their society has been relatively slow. This has not only led them to feel more frustrated and worried about their own circumstances and life goals, but also has impacted their sense of identity. "Our teachers are not updated and competent. They do not know the importance of social media. It helps us see the world and help pass our time," shared a 13-year-old. Around 95 percent of the girls in our study found social media as one of their primary spaces to explore and express themselves, given their limited physical mobility. Another girl added, "I feel that I am missing out a lot for not being able to do what my brothers can do. But with social media, I can catch up on everything."

In our focus group discussions, the girls expressed being exposed to social media and were suffering from issues like cyberbullying which they were not being able to share with anyone. One of the teachers we interviewed shared that many of her students were getting married early to someone whom they had only met on social media because they did not want to feel lonely or were unsure about how their life would unfold. She added that girls were also being targeted and sexually harassed by men on social media, but because they feel shame about the situation, they do not come forward and seek help or support. Meanwhile, a few of the teachers we spoke with considered social media a distraction, and this increasing misunderstanding between female teachers and their students has created disconnect.

> "Our teachers are not updated and competent. They do not know the importance of social media. It helps us see the world and help pass our time," shared a 13-year-old.

Relevance of TSEL: Role of female teachers in addressing the needs of adolescent girls

A. FEMALE TEACHERS PLAY A CRUCIAL ROLE IN HELPING ADOLESCENT GIRLS BE MORE SELF-AWARE

TSEL interventions that include gender-transformative content rely on teachers to scaffold learning experiences according to gender-based needs, to create a safe space for adolescents by ensuring essential support and information (Cherewick et al., 2021) and to model reflective practices. However, both the girls and the female teachers who were the part of this study shared that teachers have not been able to fulfill these roles.

TSEL aims to improve the opportunities, outcomes, and achievements of all students who are impacted by structural inequalities by intentionally focusing on the self-awareness of educators (Jagers et al., 2018). However, though the adolescent girls we spoke with expected their teachers to understand and respond to their emotional needs, they reported that their teachers themselves were less competent in managing their own emotions. One 15-year-old shared that, "our female teachers don't know how to manage their emotions themselves; they interact with us according to their mood and we don't know when to approach them."

Even though there was often only one female teacher at the secondary level in the community schools we visited, around three-quarters of the adolescent girls in our research believed that their female teachers should play a significant role in helping them achieve their goals. Having had similar physical, social, and emotional journeys, the girls felt they could learn a lot from the experiences of their female teachers. The students considered that female teachers could have a very

important role in their overall development, especially to help them improve their studies, navigate the physical and emotional problems related to menstruation, express themselves, and tackle problems related to gender, bullying, and harassment (see Figure 5). Yet less than a third of the girls felt confident that their female teachers knew them well or stated that they felt connected with their female teachers, and less than half believed their female teachers could help them solve their problems. As one student complained, "Sometimes we feel like even our teachers don't know when to speak at what moment and that makes us less trustworthy and someone whom we don't want to look up to."

Of the seven schools we visited, only one school had a female teacher who was specifically focused on mentoring the students—especially adolescent girls—to help them navigate gender-based concerns and problems. The students at that school said that whenever they had any problem, she was the first person to whom they would go for support. The teacher shared that "even with good intentions, there are times when I feel like I am not enough to support them. During those times, I try my best to share my relevant experiences and also share their concerns with other relevant people and get help from them. The more I learn, the more I can be of support to my students." In the focus group discussion conducted with the girls from this school, the girls shared happiness over having a designated female teacher to share their concerns and expressed how much she mattered to them.

Female teachers report lack of understanding about SEL to support their students: No support exists for them from the school or the government
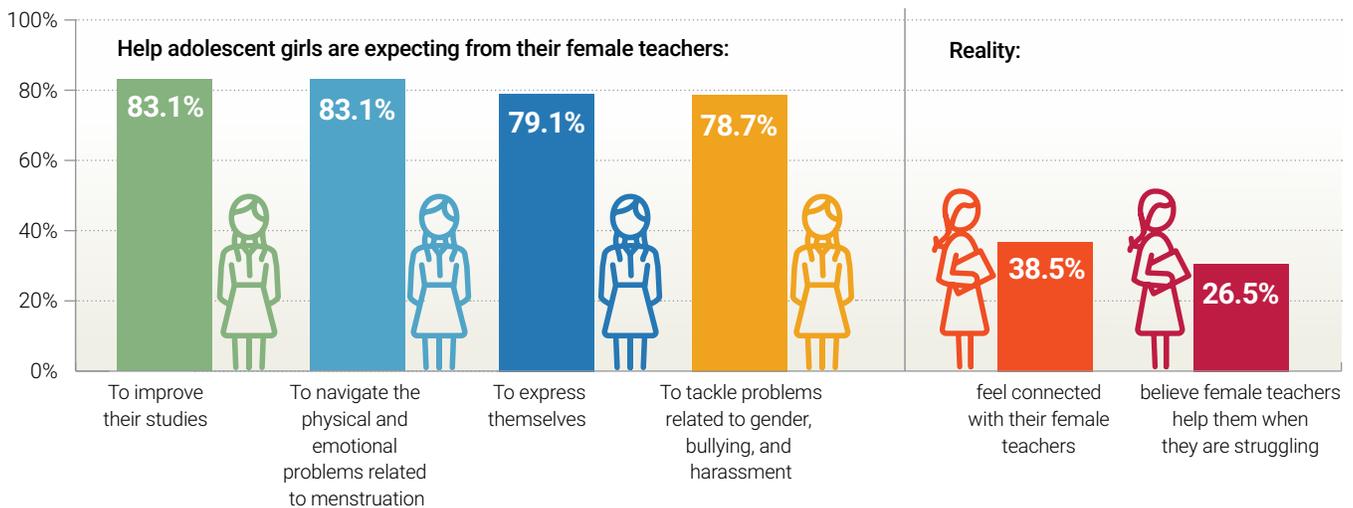
A. ALREADY CARRYING HUGE EMOTIONAL BURDENS, FEMALE TEACHERS HAVE THE ADDITIONAL TASK OF SUPPORTING ADOLESCENT GIRLS

The teachers that we talked to shared that they did not feel prepared to take on the role of social-emotional support to their adolescent girl students. They reported that they did not feel like role models and felt unprepared to do this because of lack of knowledge about SEL, their ongoing personal financial challenges, and the emotional labor they themselves were going through.

Apart from two teachers, the teachers in our focus group discussions and interviews reported that they had never heard of "social-emotional needs" or of SEL. Moreover, there was a lack of resources for teacher training that could provide them with an idea about the social-emotional needs of adolescent girls. Only one principal was aware of the importance of SEL and the role of female teachers in executing programs related to SEL. But the principal pointed out that with limited budget allocations, particularly for these concerns, it was difficult to provide any relevant support to female teachers.

The teachers reported that most of the girls studying in community schools came from lower economic backgrounds and were most prone to issues like abuse and sexual harassment.

FIGURE 5. Expectations versus reality

Help adolescent girls are expecting from their female teachers:

- To improve their studies: 83.1%
- To navigate the physical and emotional problems related to menstruation: 83.1%
- To express themselves: 79.1%
- To tackle problems related to gender, bullying, and harassment: 78.7%

Reality:

- feel connected with their female teachers: 38.5%
- believe female teachers help them when they are struggling: 26.5%

Source: Author's survey data, 2022.

One 15-year-old shared that, "our female teachers don't know how to manage their emotions themselves; they interact with us according to their mood and we don't know when to approach them."

One teacher told the story of how she once had an eighth grader who was being sexually abused by her neighbor; the teacher felt guilty about not being able to do anything even after the girl opened up to her; "I feel guilty that I don't know what to do when students open up with such issues, only counseling doesn't help and I don't know any other measures as a teacher that I could connect her to." School leaders told a similar story: "Teacher training is only a formality; no specific training has happened to keep adolescent girls in mind. Though a few trainings were done on menstrual awareness, it wasn't helpful as a lot of girls are hesitant to share about it. We don't know how we can overcome that."

Teachers shared their financial challenges and reported that it is difficult for them to be a part of any professional training or empowerment programs on their own unless the local government or the school provides workshops and trainings. One of the school principals we interviewed stated that under the policy of decentralization, local government should cater to these kinds of needs, yet this type of support is still insufficient. All the school leaders we spoke with shared that although the local government had organized teacher training on other topics, it had not provided anything related to SEL.

The teachers in our study confirmed that they had never been a part of any training or had access to any resources to help them develop their own social-emotional skills. Further, female teachers who had only basic qualifications reported being more concerned about benefits like pension, benefits, and medical allowances, with late stipend payments leaving them less space to focus on their professional or personal development. In this context, they did not self-initiate being part of trainings apart from the ones that the school or the local government provided.

The teachers in our research shared that the heavy workloads at home, discrimination at school, and insufficient opportunities for participation in meetings and seminars made them feel frustrated about their work. They also reported that they felt their contributions often went unrecognized, and they had little sense of agency with limited to no say in their own classroom pedagogical practices. This lack of acknowledgement regarding their role seems to have discouraged them from making an extra effort to work on other components apart from the designated course content. Similarly, they did not have any idea how to include the components of SEL in the courses they were teaching.

IV. Recommendations

The results of this study make it clear that female teachers have a very important role to play in addressing the substantial social and emotional needs of adolescent girls in Nepal. However, there currently exists a disconnect in the relationship between female teachers and students, due in large part to the lack of SEL awareness among female teachers. Therefore, it is critical for the national government, local government, school management committees, and school leaders to shift their attention toward helping female teachers foster their emotional literacy skills.

The following recommendations are for (1) the national and local government to build foundational support and plan for SEL; (2) for the private sector and non-governmental organizations to strengthen the knowledge, competencies, and capacity of female teachers to prepare them to support the social emotional needs of adolescent girls; (3) for schools to promote SEL among female teachers; and (4) for multiple stakeholders to use data for continuous improvement.

A. BUILD FOUNDATIONAL SUPPORT AND PLAN FOR SEL

Gendered social norms and expectations have led to differences in the social and emotional needs of adolescent boys and girls, which impact their educational opportunities and outcomes. TSEL helps build a strong, respectful foundation with the acknowledgment of students' similarities and differences as individuals, supports critical examination and reflection on the roots of inequity, and fosters collaborative solutions to community and societal problems. This change is a long-term process that will be most effective when national and local governments establish a strong foundation for the implementation of school-based SEL intervention programs.

Although SEL has gained considerable attention in the education sector globally, it is still new to the Nepal government. As such, national and local governments have the opportunity to develop a shared vision and plan to promote TSEL by bringing in multiple stakeholders to build commitment and coordinated efforts. With the adoption of decentralization as a national priority (ADB, 2022), the autonomy provided to local governments to respond to the needs of local contexts can help promote inclusion in education by focusing on the critical aspects that fit each community, including TSEL. Table 3 outlines critical first steps for this process.

TABLE 3. Actors and actions to build foundational support and plan for TSEL

ACTOR	ACTION
Mayors and deputy mayors	• Envision and align long-term goals in collaboration with school leaders. • Review existing SEL-related initiatives and efforts. • Work on a short-term plan to move towards those goals. • Bring female teachers into the discussion and goal setting process. • Align resources by dedicating long-term funding to sustain SEL programs.
Education advocates and advisors to local government	• Collaborate with academics and researchers • Prepare and disseminate consistent messaging regarding TSEL and the role of female teachers across multiple platforms.
School leaders	• Identify a designated teacher to focus on TSEL.
TPD trainers	• Help teachers integrate TSEL in curriculum, instruction, as well as mentorship programs. • Bring topics like managing the emotional labor and stress of teaching and strengthening SEL competencies to support student social and emotional growth into the discussion.

B. STRENGTHEN TSEL KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS, AND BELIEFS OF FEMALE TEACHERS

Combining gender-targeted interventions and gender-integrated efforts has proven to enable gender-responsive transformation (Global Partnership for Education, 2017). Though attention has gradually been given to increasing the number of female teachers in the schools, it is also important to ensure their competencies in SEL. In this context, it is important to consider what role female teachers should play in the social and emotional development of young adolescent girls.

TPD is about both "equipping"—providing skills and knowledge to teachers for immediate application—and "enabling"—developing teachers' ability to meet students' needs. In the case of TPD for SEL in Nepal, however, both its equipping and enabling functions have been missing and thus must be a priority moving forward. Teachers' perceptions of SEL in general, and as a part of their teaching practice, and their motivation to implement their knowledge in practice are key elements for the effectiveness of any SEL policy. Thus, it is important to engage them as well.

Given the low sense of agency expressed by female teachers, it is critical that they develop confidence in their values and belief systems and explore innovative ideas to improve their pedagogical practices, thereby engaging, equipping, and enabling them. Table 4 outlines critical first steps for this process.

TABLE 4. Actors and actions to strengthen TSEL knowledge, skills, and beliefs of female teachers

ACTOR	ACTION
Journalists and reporters	• Bring in school leaders, teachers, and parents in different discussions and informative panels.
Private sector stakeholders	• Dedicate corporate social responsibility (CSR) funds to promote and sustain systemic implementation of TSEL.
NGO stakeholders	• Provide professional training and guidance to school leaders as well as teachers by conducting TSEL workshops and training. • Engage parents and guardians in conversations, discussions, workshops, and trainings and help them identify their role as important actors to strengthen TSEL.
School leaders	• Create supportive and productive intervention programs related to TSEL for adolescents.

C. PROMOTE TSEL AMONG TEACHERS, PRIORITIZING FEMALE TEACHERS AND THEIR WELL-BEING

Schools play a very important role in promoting SEL among teachers by creating a supportive and productive staff culture where female teachers feel a sense of belonging. With most of the female teachers reporting a lack of self-esteem, one of the best ways to address this is by creating a psychologically safe and respectful environment. Though principals and school administrators play a major role here, it is a collective effort. Table 5 outlines who can help promote SEL in schools and how.

TABLE 5: Actors and actions to promote TSEL among teachers in schools

ACTOR	ACTION
Principals and school administrators	• Create an internal system where teachers, and especially female teachers, can share the obstacles they are facing and the changes they would like to see in the school. • Create different forms of communication channels so that all teachers feel comfortable providing feedback. • Build an understanding of teachers' professional experiences regularly by making a concerted effort to foster connection between principals and teachers.
Teachers	• Keep their emotional and social well-being as their priority, with consistent well-being check-ins between teachers and the admin. • Bring parents and guardians into the SEL conversation to build a positive school climate. • Make a mindful effort to foster connection with the students.
School coordinators	• Provide space for programs and projects that offer a space where teachers can have conversations related to their well-being.
All stakeholders	• Ensure equal treatment of teachers and play a role in fostering a positive school climate.

D. USE DATA FOR CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Extensive contextual research is needed to address the different needs of adolescents based on the gender identities they have formed. Also, it is important to help all stakeholders identify their role to become a part of this systemic change. Of highest importance is contextual research related to the gender-role identities of adolescents. It is important to understand the preferential skills that both teachers and students need to gain, and look into ways to address those needs, concerns related to students' well-being and how to help them achieve better learning outcomes, and ways teachers could support them more.

Though there is a general idea about what adolescent girls need in order to have better learning outcomes, context-specific evidence is still missing. Evidence has shown that in all cases, encouragement from parents and teachers has been beneficial (Priess et al., 2009). Reconfiguring teachers' SEL programs to target them toward parents and community with the support of local government, NGOs, and private sector, will increasingly help adolescent girls achieve further. Evidence suggests that even with limitations, municipalities have been able to find local solutions and mobilize their resources to provide a rapid response during the Covid-19 crisis in Nepal (UNICEF, 2021). So, if provided with knowledge and understanding related to SEL, they could adapt resources to support their teachers and find alternative measures to support adolescent girls to fulfill their social-emotional needs.

V. Conclusion

Transformative intervention programs for SEL can significantly help in closing the gender gap in education for adolescent girls, an urgent agenda item for Nepal. Building SEL competencies among female teachers is crucial to supporting the social-emotional needs and literacy of adolescent girls. Teachers are an important starting point in promoting gender equality in education through both their attitudes and instructional practices. Teachers who have grown up in similar contexts of systemic injustice have unconscious gender biases, which must be checked through the development of emotional literacy before they can become helpful and influential role models. Teachers who reflect on their gender stereotypes help build a trusting, reflective environment for their students.

It is not enough to create more ways for girls to access school; we must also ensure they graduate with strong self-awareness and agency so that they can achieve their goals. With teachers who feel a strong sense of belonging and have autonomy and SEL competence, and with better policy and programming to support teachers' educational practice, adolescent girls can thrive in the secondary school system. That means adolescent girls will graduate from their schools with better emotional and mental well-being, improved learning outcomes, strong social-emotional skills, and a strong sense of belonging, agency, and competency.

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Methodology

This study utilized a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methods in both primary and secondary data collection. The primary data collection was via survey, focus group discussions (FGD), and one-on-one interviews, while the secondary data sourcing was from literature and reports available online. The research was done in multiple phases over the months of July to September 2022, with each phase fulfilling specific objectives of the research questions.

PHASE 1: SECONDARY RESEARCH

The first phase of study was the secondary research conducted via a desk review process. In this phase we sought to understand the existing programs and policies that are related to SEL in the context of Nepal and how are they being executed to help ensure gender equity. This phase assisted in understanding the context for adolescent girls and the role of female teachers in the holistic development of adolescent girls. A desk review of case studies, existing articles, and reports was also conducted. This secondary data informed the construction of methodological instruments used in the second phase, including questionnaires, FGD protocols, and online and in-person interview guides.

PHASE 2: PRIMARY RESEARCH

The second phase of the study was the primary research conducted using survey, FGD, and one-on-one interview methods. A survey was done with the adolescent girls to understand their social-emotional needs and how they see the role of their female teachers in addressing those problems. To further the understanding, FGDs were done to develop a holistic understanding of the problem and to gain deeper knowledge about the ways their female teachers are (or are not) supporting them.

This was followed by FGDs with female teachers to understand their context and how they see their role in addressing the needs of adolescent girls. When some of the female teachers felt uncomfortable sharing their concerns as a group, one-on-one interviews were done with them. One-on-one interviews were also conducted with school leaders to explore existing programs and policies that support female teachers in their growth and development.

Sample Population

METHOD	AGE GROUP IN YEARS	NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS	EDUCATIONAL LEVEL	INSTITUTION	SETTING
Survey	13–20	249	Grade 7–10	Secondary-level schools Residential learning centers	7 secondary-level community schools of Kathmandu District (3 schools), Lalitpur District (2 schools), and Kavrepalanchowk District (2 schools) 2 residential learning centers (students from other districts of Nepal who are provided scholarships by multiple organizations and are studying in Kathmandu in various higher secondary schools of Kathmandu Municipality and Lalitpur Municipality)
Focus group discussions	13-20	35 girls in seven different groups	Grade 7–10	Secondary schools	7 secondary level community schools of Kathmandu District (3 schools), Lalitpur District (2 schools), and Kavrepalanchowk District (2 schools) 1 residential learning center of Lalitpur
	Adults	8 female teachers in three different groups	Graduate degrees (bachelor's, and master's,)	Secondary-schools and higher secondary-level schools	1 secondary school from Kathmandu District 1 secondary school from Kavrepalanchowk District 1 organization working with volunteer teachers

continued

METHOD	AGE GROUP IN YEARS	NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS	EDUCATIONAL LEVEL	INSTITUTION	SETTING
1-on-1 interviews	Adults	7 female teachers	Graduate degrees (Bachelors, Masters, and MPhil degrees)	Secondary schools and learning centers	5 secondary schools 1 residential learning center 1 organization working with volunteer teachers
	Adults	6 school leaders	Graduate degrees (Bachelors, Masters, and MPhil degrees)	Secondary schools and learning centers	3 male principals of secondary level school from Kathmandu District, Lalitpur District, Kavrepalanchowk District 1 female principal of secondary level school from Kathmandu District 1 male vice principal from Paanchkhal Municipality (Kavrepalanchowk District) 1 female school coordinator from Kathmandu Municipality (Kathmandu District)

Evidence and methods

Guiding research question: How can policy and practice that ensures emotional literacy for female teachers support the empowerment of young adolescent girls in Nepal?

SUPPORTING RESEARCH QUESTION	EVIDENCE	METHOD(S)	SOURCE(S)/PARTICIPANT(S)
What are the social-emotional needs of adolescent girls in Nepal?	Understand social-emotional learning needs of adolescent girls	Survey	Adolescent girls studying at the secondary level from the 13-to-20 age group
		FGD	Adolescent girls studying at the secondary level from the 13-to-20 age group
	Understand the perspectives of adolescent girls about the roles female teachers should be playing in addressing their social-emotional needs	Survey	Adolescent girls studying at the secondary level from the 13-to-20 age group
	Understand the perspectives of adolescent girls about the role their female teachers are playing currently to address their social emotional needs:	FGD	Adolescent girls studying at the secondary level from the 13-to-20 age group
	1. What type of role teachers believe female teachers should play? 2. How are they supporting or not to develop SEL skills in young adolescent girls?	1-on-1 interviews	School principals/vice principals/school co-coordinators Female teachers teaching in secondary schools
What is the role of female teachers in meeting those needs?	Understand the current role of female teachers in addressing the social-emotional needs of adolescent girls Understand how female teachers see themselves in the larger conversation and contribution going in and around SEL Understand the support female teachers are currently receiving in areas related to SEL	Document review	Asian Development Bank reports, Government of Nepal, Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology reports Journal publications National Center for Educational Development report UNICEF reports USAID reports World Bank reports
		1-on-1 interviews	School principals/vice principals/school co-coordinators Female teachers working at the secondary level
		FGIs	Female teachers working at the secondary level
What support do female teachers have and need in order to fulfill that role and fully support the transformative social-emotional learning of adolescent girls in Nepal?	Review the existing state-level policies addressing SEL	Document review	Government of Nepal. Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology reports National Center for Educational Development report
	Perspectives of local policymakers on current policies	Informal off-the-record conversation	Advisors of municipalities Mayors and deputy mayors of different municipalities of Bagmati Province

BHAWANA SHRESTHA is the co-founder of the organization My Emotions Matter, and is a redemptive storyteller and Nepali educator dedicated to helping individuals and teams develop the mindset and skills for emotional intelligence. Bhawana became an advocate for girls' education when she herself was still a child after noticing the gender-based differences within her community and the impact of systemic gender barriers on girls like her.

At the age of 18, she began a career as a journalist in pursuit of social change but switched careers in 2013 to spend three years as a Teach for Nepal fellow in rural schools. Her interest in emotional intelligence stems from this experience, as she realized its significance to improving educational and life outcomes, especially for girls and young women. A faculty member at King's College, Nepal, Bhawana co-founded and leads the Office of Safe and Respectable Learning, working to prevent harassment and discrimination and advance equity, diversity, inclusion, and social justice at the college.

Currently pursuing her Ph.D in educational leadership from Kathmandu University, Bhawana holds an M.Phil. and an M.A. in English from Pokhara and Tribhuvan Universities, respectively. She was also selected as a "Living Through Lived Experience" fellow for Teach for All in 2019.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I am grateful to Oshin, who provided me with research support. She was with me to discuss the research questions, to finalize the research instruments, and to collect data in the field.

Thank you, Sagar, for always motivating me to move ahead and aspire even when it meant My Emotions Matter (MEM) would have to go through my absence for a considerable amount of time. Thank you to Aprajita and Anusha for handling my responsibilities in my absence. Pankaj, you were always my cheerleader. Thank you for always being by my side.

To the Teach for Nepal Alumni network, thank you very much for helping me figure out the community and the schools to collect my data from. To name a few—Bijay, Dipendra, Rajan, Shiri, grateful for your support.

To King's College, Nepal, for the logistical support throughout this journey, especially during the data collection phase. Especial thanks to Swechhya for handling my responsibilities at the Office of Safe and Respectable Learning (OSRL) in my absence and supporting me throughout.

To the team at CUE and Brookings: Rebecca, Ariana, Atenea, Tamryn, Katie, Tracey, Emily, Maggie, Leyah, Maya, and the library team.

To Jenn: thank you for all the feedback. At one point it felt like you know my brief better than I do.

To my co-Echidnas Hina, Tony, Halima: the humor, the tea conversations, our support plus group conversations have made this journey unforgettable. Tony, I loved exploring DC with you. Hina, our heart-to-heart tea conversations are something I am carrying back with me. Halima, the hugs we shared kept me warm throughout.

To my family and friends, thank you for understanding my hectic schedule here and taking the initiative of checking in yourselves and not expecting the same from me. I am especially grateful to my younger brother, whose wedding I had to miss so that I could join the residency.

Last but not the least, to my Nepali friends whom I made in DC, thank you for all your support throughout. I felt at home here just because of you. To name a few—Ojaswi, Arbind, Deepak, Bibek, and Sanket, thank you for offering your tremendous support whenever I was lost, anxious, and overwhelmed.

About the Echidna Global Scholars Program

The Echidna Global Scholars Program at the Center for Universal Education (CUE) at Brookings seeks to catalyze and amplify the impact of local leaders working to advance gender equality in and through education across the Global South.

During a six-month fellowship, Echidna Global Scholars conduct individual research focused on improving learning opportunities and life outcomes for girls, young women, and gender non-conforming people, develop their leadership and evidence-based policy skills, build substantive knowledge on gender and global education issues, and expand their pathways for impact. Upon completion of the fellowship, scholars transition to the Echidna Alumni Network, a growing community of practice aimed at promoting their significant, sustained, and collective influence on gender-transformative education globally and locally.