



The Need in Nepal

Worldwide, 59 million children are denied an education ([UN 2018](#)). In Nepal, one of the world's least developed countries ([UN 2021](#)), lack of access to quality education disproportionately affects females and children from disadvantaged communities ([Thapa 2015](#)) and further intensifies poverty, child marriage, child labor, gender-based violence, caste discrimination, and human trafficking.

The Covid-19 pandemic worsened the already difficult situation. A UNICEF 2020 survey reported that 1/3 of respondents had experienced a lack of drinking water, food, medicine, fuel, and hygiene necessities during the extended lockdowns. During the 2020-21 academic year, 95% of children in Nepal were out of in-person school and more than half stopped their studies altogether ([UNICEF 2020](#)). These school closures and increased drop-out rates have resulted in significantly increased risks and rates of child marriage ([UNICEF 2021](#)) and trafficking ([US State Department 2020](#)).

Even before the pandemic, the situation in Nepal was shockingly bad: 25% of the population existed on less than 50 cents (USD) per day ([The World Food Programme 2018](#)); 10% of girls married by age 15 and 36.6% by age 18 ([Nepal Central Bureau of Statistics and UNICEF 2014](#)); tens of thousands of trafficking victims each year, the majority of them women and children ([National Human Rights Commission Nepal 2018](#)); child labor affects 1 in 3 children (37.2%) between the ages of 5-14, often in hazardous conditions that are forced or exploitative ([UNICEF 2018](#) and [US Department of Labor 2017](#)); and 12% of children separated from their parents ([Nepal DHS 2016](#)), including roughly 20,000 children living in orphanages, many of which are unregulated and squalid ([Government of Nepal 2015](#)).

Nepal's dismal rates of educational attainment are reflective of systemic inequality. Historically, formal education in Nepal was banned for the general public and was only available to children from royal and wealthy families. This persisted until the 1950s when democratic reforms resulted in the formation of a public education system ([Mathema 2007](#)). Slowly and unevenly, government and private schools were established throughout the mountainous country. The country's challenging topography, ongoing political instability, strict caste system, patriarchal traditions, and ethnic and caste discrimination still kept the vast majority of people from going to school. Present educational attainment reflects this historical reality (from [Nepal Demographic and Health Survey 2016](#)): two in five women and one in five men in Nepal have no education; only 35% of women and 47% of men have secondary education (grades 7-12); the median number of years of schooling is more than double among adult men than women, and rural women (47%) and men (26%) are more likely than urban women (35%) and men (17%) to have no education at all.

Primary education enrollment and attendance rates are improving in Nepal, and 80% of children aged 6-12 now attend school ([Nepal DHS 2016](#)). However, access to secondary education is unreliable and inequality is still common. Nationwide, only 25% of children in Nepal who enroll in first grade will complete grade 10 ([Dilas, 2014](#)), and children only receive an average of eight years of schooling ([UNESCO & Government of Nepal 2015](#)). Lower castes and other underprivileged groups, including indigenous communities (Janajatis) and orphaned children, are enrolled in secondary education at lower rates and drop out at higher rates than their privileged peers. For example, as of



2016 in the Terai region of Nepal, only 23.1% of people from the lowest caste (Dalit) were literate, compared to 80% of the highest castes (Brahman and Chetri) ([Nepal DOE 2016](#)).

The Nepali government, with the help of various aid organizations, has been working to improve the education system, and some recent social inclusion and gender equality reforms have been introduced to increase access to secondary education. To this effect, in 2016, the government incorporated grades 11 and 12 into the public education system. Despite these reforms, results of Nepal's national standardized grade 10 exams for 2019 demonstrated a gross disparity in student pass rates between rural and urban schools, and between public and private schools ([Ghimire 2020](#)). On average, only 3.8% of female students from the Dalit ("low") caste communities, for example, pass the grade 10 exam ([Bishwakarma 2018](#)). This highlights that even with best efforts, educational reforms in impoverished countries can take years to be broadly effective.

Inequality and discrimination for people from rural, indigenous, low-caste, and impoverished communities are even more apparent in higher education (college or university level). For example, only 2% of women and 3% of men from the poorest fifth of the population have more than secondary education, as compared with 25% of women and 34% of men from the wealthiest fifth ([Nepal DHS 2018](#)). Dalits, who constitute 18% of Nepal's population, make up only 3.5% of the student body at Nepal's public institutes of higher learning. Indigenous people represent about 35% of the population and constitute just 6% of the university student population ([ADB 2015](#)).

Even for marginalized students who can overcome the socio-economic obstacles in their path, the problem of paying for higher education is largely insurmountable. Funding opportunities, including both grants and loans, are limited and very difficult to access. Educational loans from banks in Nepal are technically available but are only granted against fixed assets or collateral, making them completely unavailable for most of the population ([Dhungel & Lamichhane 2011](#)), and only a few public and private sector scholarships for higher-and postsecondary education exist ([Aadhar 2017](#)).

Institutional care homes for children and nonprofit organizations have historically provided care and support to vulnerable children in Nepal only up to grade 10, or age 16 ([Government of Nepal 2015](#)). Since the June 2016 parliamentary education reform declared basic secondary education to run through grade 12, more organizations have begun supporting students through grade 12 or age 18. However, many organizations are reluctant to provide support for young individuals once they reach legal adulthood. As such, support for higher education through nonprofits is extremely rare and is most often distributed via unregistered and fragmentary means.

Indeed, young people in Nepal represent the most vulnerable segment of the population in one of the poorest and least developed countries in the world. As long as the vast majority of Nepal's intelligent, hardworking young people are without opportunities for higher education and advancement, they, and the country itself, will stay stuck in the cycle of poverty.