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To cite this article: Dónya S. Madjdian, Elise Talsma, Niva Shrestha, Kenda Cunningham, Maria Koelen & Lenneke Vaandrager (2022): 'Like a frog in a well'. A qualitative study of adolescent girls' life aspirations in Western Nepal, *Journal of Youth Studies*, DOI: [10.1080/13676261.2022.2038782](https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2022.2038782)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2022.2038782>



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Published online: 22 Feb 2022.



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'Like a frog in a well'. A qualitative study of adolescent girls' life aspirations in Western Nepal

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ABSTRACT

Adolescents' aspirations are important for a healthy transition into adulthood. Knowledge about girls' aspirations and their formation in a low-income context is scant. Framed within life course theory, this qualitative study aimed to understand adolescent girls' life aspirations, with a specific focus on school, work, family life, health and diets, and explore how aspirations are shaped within girls' everyday life context, in Nawalpur and Parasi, two districts in the plains of Western Nepal. Data collection involved interviewing 17 adolescent girls (11–19 years) using creative elicitation techniques: timeline drawing and network mapping. Thematic analyses revealed unique aspiration profiles of younger, older, and married adolescent girls. While younger girls were present-oriented and aspired high, older girls balanced aspirations with reality and in turn, adjusted their aspirations. Married women had mostly resigned themselves to their present lives and transferred their lost aspirations onto their children. Findings underscore how girls' feelings, others in their daily lives, gendered norms, and structural factors, are related to different domains of aspirations during different stages of adolescence. Results give direction to integrated policies and programs that aim to sustain and cultivate adolescent girls' aspirations at specific stages of adolescence.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 4 November 2021
Accepted 1 February 2022

KEYWORDS

Adolescence; Aspirations; Nepal; Life course; Gender

Introduction

Adolescence is a powerful time of change due to rapid physical, psychosocial, and cognitive growth (Lloyd 2005; Sawyer et al. 2012), including the development of aspirations (Nurmi 1991). Aspirations are future-oriented desires or intentions for one's possible self, driven by (un)conscious motivations. They are one of the building blocks for a

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 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed at <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2022.2038782>.

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healthy transition into adulthood as they can (positively) steer choices and behavior, thereby laying the foundation for human development (Hart 2016; Sawyer et al. 2012; Bandura 2001; Sirin et al. 2004). Adolescents' aspirations have been associated with their psychological wellbeing, educational attainment (Favara 2017), vocational outcomes (Ross 2019), and healthy behavior including healthy nutrition and lifestyles (Wu, Shek, and Leung 2016; Bandura 2001; Wang et al. 2011).

Despite great interest, adolescence remains however a poorly understood life stage. In a rural low-income context, aspirations and their development within everyday life, are particularly understudied. Few studies focus on aspirations in areas of work, education or reproductive health, but thereby overlook other, often interrelated aspirations in areas of marriage, fertility, health, and diets. Research gaps particularly exist in the areas of adolescents' aspirations for diets and health (Cunningham et al. 2020). Moreover, studies on aspirations often focus on specific age- or population groups (i.e. married or 15–19-year olds), or consider adolescence as one homogenous group thereby ignoring the diversity among adolescents. Finally, most evidence on aspirations is based on quantitative survey data. But because structural and underlying drivers of aspirations, as well as the role of others in shaping these is less easily measured quantitatively, these areas are underresearched.

To support adolescent girls in reaching their full potential (Patton et al. 2016), as well as engaging them in decision-making and integrated programming, a broader perspective on their aspirations, including how, when, and by whom their aspirations are shaped, is essential. Framed within a life course perspective and based on a qualitative study involving participatory elicitation methods, this paper aims to (a) advance the understanding of adolescent girls' aspirations related to school, work, family life, food, and health and (b) explore factors and actors that influence adolescent girls' aspirations.

Our study is situated in Nepal, where persistent societal and gendered norms and underlying structural factors are known to restrict girls' capabilities in several life domains (Janzen et al. 2017; Cunningham and D'Arcy 2017; Mathur, Malhotra, and Mehta 2001; Sekine and Hodgkin 2017), potentially influencing their aspirations. Life events such as menarche (the first menstruation), early marriage and consequently parenthood, result in changing social roles or social status transitions and are accompanied by new expectations and societal norms, which can affect aspirations in other life domains. Transitioning to an adolescent girl or a wife/daughter-in-law, for example, often has consequences for diets and health through unequal intrahousehold food and care practices that favor boys over girls (Harris-Fry et al. 2018; Madjdian and Bras 2016). Moreover, girls lag behind boys in terms of secondary school completion and attending quality education, and entry to the labor market is often constrained by gendered norms or traditions (NIRT 2016).

The remainder of this paper first conceptualizes aspirations within the life course perspective, after which we describe our methods and findings. In the last section, we discuss findings and provide directions for programs, policies, and research.

Conceptualizing aspirations within the life course perspective

Since aspirations are shaped within an everyday-life context and unfold as girls progress through adolescence (Hart 2016), the life course perspective offers a useful lens

to study aspirations. Whilst the life course itself is defined as a 'sequence of socially-defined events and roles that an individual enacts over time' (Giele and Elder 1998, 22), we position adolescence on a developmental continuum, acknowledging its dynamic nature, rather than considering it being one distinct life stage (Green 2017). In this section, the four main themes of the life course perspective are described in relation to adolescents' aspirations and in connection to the Nepalese context: the interplay of human lives and historical time, timing of lives, linked lives, and human agency (Elder 1998).

First, life trajectories and aspirations related to school, work, family formation (marriage, having children), health and food are all interrelated and embedded within time and geographical place (Elder 1998; Naafs and Skelton 2018). For instance, access to health or the food security status in a region, opportunities for higher education and in the labor market, or societal changes may increase opportunities or restrictions to develop adolescents' aspirations, over time. In Nepal, early marriage is often followed by pregnancy within one or two years after marriage. Dropping out of school, due to for instance marriage or school failure (LeVine 2019), may restrict girls' mobility outside home, and consequently affect their occupational aspirations.

Second, aspirations can be determined by early influences in childhood and continue to develop throughout adolescence, linking to the concept of 'timing of lives' (Elder 1998). Adolescence is characterized by biological, psychological, and social transitions. The sequence of certain events at certain ages, such as leaving school or marriage, often leads to a change in social roles across time, culture, and place. Aspirations, in turn, may shift as one's own expectations or external constraints are changing during adolescence (Green 2017; Nurmi 1991). Moreover, Nepal is experiencing rapid societal changes and transitions, as indicated by decreasing total fertility rates (1.9 births per woman in 2020), high male out-migration, increasing years of schooling, and changes in age group structures that result in a so-called youth bulge and a demographic dividend (MOH, New ERA, and ICF 2017). These changes may either open new horizons for girls or restrict their aspirations.

Third, human lives are connected through social relations and networks, and with the wider world, also referred to as linked or interdependent lives (Elder 1998). During adolescence, parents, families, and friends become particularly important and mutually influence each other (Green 2017). Relationships influence aspirations and behavior through expectations, support, control, or being a role model. For instance, there is strong evidence that parental expectations or aspirations for children are associated with their children's, particularly educational aspirations (Kirk et al. 2011). In Nepal, parental perceived returns of investments in schooling may be higher for boys than for girls and early marriage is still common practice. Hence, parental aspirations and expectations for daughters might therefore differ, leading to affect girls' aspirations as well. The idea of linked lives also resonates with Ray's (2006) theory on the aspirations window that implies that an adolescent girl may draw her aspirations from the lives of individuals in her everyday life. In this sense, role models may become increasingly important. In an experimental study by Beaman and colleagues (2012) in India, girls changed their occupational aspirations upon seeing female leadership in their villages. Moreover, several studies have reported the positive influence of peers on one's educational aspirations (Habracken 2018; Davies and Kandel 1981) and dietary choices (Sapkota 2017).

Finally, individuals shape their own lives through human agency: the ‘choices and actions they take within the opportunities and constraints of history and social circumstance’ (Elder 1998, 182). The extent to which an adolescent girl can exert agency - the ability to develop and act upon ideas of what she would like to achieve (Markus and Nurius 1986) - is however not just based on her current wishes, but it also depends on her past, social relations, and structural factors. In line with the notion of human agency is Appadurai’s (2004) ‘capacity to aspire’. He argues that aspirations always form in ‘interaction and in the thick of social life’ and that the capacity to aspire is dependent on social, cultural, and economic experiences. Although aspirations can be ‘high’, external factors such as poverty, but also ‘social locations’ such as caste/ethnicity, may affect aspirations (Gottfredson 1981; Nurmi 1987). In Nepal, poverty, but also caste-ethnicity divides, run deep. Girls from upper caste/ethnic groups and wealthier families tend to aspire for more years of education, or for jobs requiring higher education, compared to those who are socially excluded, or who come from less wealthier families, due to unequal availability of opportunities (Madjdian et al. 2021). DeJaeghere, in her study on adolescent girls’ educational aspirations in Tanzania, connects agency to aspirations by using a capability approach. She presents aspirations and agency as a ‘dialectic relationship’ that is affected by everyday-life contexts, including its constraints and opportunities. Both agency and aspirations are thus dynamically changing over time and socially constructed (DeJaeghere 2018).

Materials and methods

Setting and sampling

This qualitative study was conducted among a subsample of the ongoing *Suaahara II* Adolescent Girls Panel study in Nepal. *Suaahara II (SII)* is a large-scale integrated nutrition program in Nepal that runs from 2016 to 2023. The program aims to improve the nutritional status of women and children in the first 1000-days window (the period between conception and a child’s second birthday) in 42 out of 77 districts in Nepal. In addition, *SII* has an adolescent learning-focused agenda to inform future adolescent health and nutrition programming. For this purpose and as part of its annual monitoring system, a cohort of 1093 adolescent girls were followed since 2017, except for 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Cunningham et al. 2020; Gyawali et al. 2019). In 2018, two neighboring districts in the Western region of Nepal – Parasi in the lowland plains (*Terai*) and Nawalpur in the hills – were purposively selected for a sub-study on adolescent girls’ aspirations. These two districts were selected as over half of Nepal’s population lives in the *Terai*; a region that is characterized by relatively high early marriage rates particularly in areas bordering India, and secondary school dropout among girls often resulting from early marriage (Sekine and Hodgkin 2017). Despite progress over the past decade, still over a quarter of girls marry between 15 and 19 years old, and by the age of 19 years, one-third of married girls have given birth to their first child. Although Nepal has achieved gender parity in primary education, girls are still more likely than boys to drop out of secondary education (MOH, New ERA, and ICF 2017; Marphatia et al. 2020). Moreover, challenges such as household food insecurity and adolescent undernutrition are more profound in the *Terai* area with one in 10 girls being too thin and almost a quarter of

girls being stunted (Van Tuijl et al. 2020). Among the adult population in Nepal, only one out of four women have obtained their school leaving certificate (MOH, New ERA, and ICF 2017). In Nepal, average family size is 4.6, with larger households being more common in rural areas.

One rural (in Parasi) and one urban (in Nawalpur) panel survey cluster (community) in each district was purposively selected based on diversity in ethnic/caste groups and variation in ages of the adolescent girls in the panel. Among the 24 girls from these communities who were (randomly) selected to participate in the *SII* panel survey in 2018, 20 girls were identified as being an adolescent according to the World Health Organization definition of adolescence (10–19 years). These girls were invited to participate in this qualitative study. Among the 20 selected girls, one girl refused to be interviewed, one of the parents refused to have her daughter interviewed, and one girl could not be located due to a recent move to another district.

Data collection

Data collection took place during monsoon season (June–September 2018). Interviews were led by a Nepalese female interviewer who was trained by the principal researcher. Training of the interviewer involved (back)translating interview guides, extensive practice, and pilot-testing tools with girls in the Kathmandu Valley and in Chitwan, a district adjacent to the study sites, after which final changes were made to the flow of the interview guide and practical use of creative elicitation methods. Interviews were all held in the homes of the girls and in the absence of other family members. Two researchers (NS and DM) were in the area during interviews to observe or add probes when necessary and only when girls felt comfortable with this. Although all girls understood and spoke Nepali, in two occasions a trained local female translator assisted the interviewer to ask questions in the girls' mother tongue (*Bhojpuri*, *Awadhi*, *Urdu*, or a blend). Creative elicitation techniques, including creating social network maps with wooden peg dolls and drawing timelines, were used to facilitate the interviews. These methods are proven suitable for adolescents, especially for younger adolescents, and acknowledge adolescents as tellers of their own stories whilst decreasing hierarchical distance between interviewer and participant (Mannay 2015; Thomson 2009). The main interview topics included: girls' perceived important persons through creating network maps with peg dolls; girls' life histories through drawing timelines and adding the – by girls – perceived important life events such as starting school, getting married and so on; and girls' aspired future lives through drawing timelines. During interviews, the interviewer referred to aspirations in its broadest sense (dreams), to encourage girls to talk about any aspiration they wished to express. As the interview went along, the interviewer also probed for aspirations related to school, work, family life, health, and food. Drawing and simultaneously discussing girls' life histories and timelines followed an iterative process (e.g. going back and forth between aspirations and life events), which was led by girls' stories instead of a specific structure. See Supplementary Table 1 for an overview of the English interview topics, probes, and sample questions. Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and two hours. All interviews were audio-recorded and photos were taken of the creative output.

Data management and analysis

Immediately after each interview, summaries were written and combined with researcher/interviewer notes. Each interview was then evaluated and thoroughly discussed within the research team on location. After that, audio recordings were transcribed verbatim from Nepali or local language audio into Nepali script by the interviewer, directly after the interviews. In cases where the local language was directly translated into Nepali, a translator originating from the study area checked the transcripts for accuracy. Nepali scripts were later translated into English by a team of three translators in Kathmandu. The English transcripts were de-identified and checked for accuracy against Nepali transcripts or audio recordings in case of unclarity and by one independent translator. To ensure anonymity, pseudonyms were created.

Theoretical thematic analysis, driven by the research questions (i.e. exploring adolescent girls' aspirations for their own lives and how and by whom aspirations are shaped within an everyday life context) and life course theory components, guided data analysis. Thematic analysis was chosen as the aim of this study is mostly explorative. This method is particularly well-suited to draw from both the conceptual framework (deductive coding) as well as allow new themes to emerge throughout the process (inductive coding). As such, the method ensures that girls' stories are not superseded by a theoretical/analytical lens only (Braun and Clarke 2006). Using this method enables providing a rich understanding of how girls make meaning of their own lives and aspirations, and what the shaping role is of context and others, through 'both reflecting reality and unpacking or unravelling the surface of reality' (Braun and Clarke 2006, 9). Two researchers (DM and NS) present during data collection, thoroughly read all interview transcripts and summaries, to become familiar with the data. DM and NS separately coded nine transcripts initially. Initial codes and notes were reviewed, after which codes were sorted into sub- and main themes. Next, DM and NS carefully compared the initial codes and (sub)themes and discussed deviant codes until agreement. A coding scheme was developed based on which the remaining eight interviews were coded (DM). A few new codes emerged, and unclear passages were discussed. This led to a revised final coding scheme, clustered into subthemes (categories) and five main themes which included: aspirations; feelings; perceived influence of others; gender norms; and structural barriers in relation to aspirations. During analysis, unique differences in aspirations and influences on aspirations between three group of girls emerged, namely younger unmarried girls, older unmarried girls, and married girls. Therefore, in a final step of analysis, the collated stories of the three groups were compared and reviewed against the (sub)themes.

Ethical considerations

Written informed (parental, if younger than 16) consent/assent was obtained prior to the interviews and the study was clearly explained to girls, parents/caretakers and local officials by the researchers and local SII staff. Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Nepal Health Research Council (No. t97/ZO1B).

Results

This section starts with an overview of the participant characteristics including the three groups of girls who shared similar stories and aspirations (see Table 1). Findings are

Table 1. participant characteristics.

Pseudonym	Age	Urban/ rural	Religion	Caste/ethnicity	Family type	School- status	Age at marriage	Children
<i>Younger girls</i>								
Amita	11	Rural	Hindu	Dalit	Joint	Yes	n/a	n/a
Arati	11	Rural	Islam	Muslim	Nuclear	Yes	n/a	n/a
Ansu	14	Rural	Hindu	Non-Dalit Terai	Joint	Yes	n/a	n/a
Devi	11	Urban	Hindu	Non-Dalit Terai	Nuclear	Yes	n/a	n/a
Padma	14	Urban	Hindu	Disadvantaged Janajati	Nuclear	Yes	n/a	n/a
Jamuna	13	Urban	Hindu	Brahmin/Chhetri	Joint	Yes	n/a	n/a
<i>Older girls</i>								
Reva	15	Rural	Hindu	Dalit	Joint	Yes	n/a	n/a
Daya	16	Rural	Islam	Muslim	Joint	Yes	n/a	n/a
Sharmila	15	Rural	Islam	Muslim	Joint	Yes	n/a	n/a
Geetu	16	Urban	Hindu	Dalit	Nuclear	Yes	n/a	n/a
<i>Young women</i>								
Riyana	18/ 19	Rural	Hindu	Non-Dalit Terai	Joint	No	17/18	1
Nisu	18/ 19	Rural	Hindu	Non-Dalit Terai	Joint	No	17/18	1
Isha	19*	Rural	Islam	Muslim	Joint	Never	12/13	1 (& pregnant)
Sarita	18	Urban	Hindu	Dalit	Nuclear	No	16	1
Susma	17	Urban	Hindu	Dalit	Joint	No	15	1
Lata	19	Urban	Hindu	Disadvantaged Janajati	Joint	No	15	2
Ganesa	18	Urban	Hindu	Disadvantaged Janajati	Joint	No	16	1

Note: *According to her timeline drawings and life story, this participant may have been 16 years old.

structured by the five main themes resulting from the thematic analysis: aspirations, feelings, influence of others, influence of gender norms, and structural barriers. The unique storylines of the three groups of girls are then described under each of these five themes, following a life course perspective.

Participant characteristics

The three groups were: seven unmarried, school-going girls aged between 11 and 14 years ('younger girls'); four unmarried and school-going girls aged between 15 and 16 years old ('older girls'); and seven married mothers 17–19 years old ('young women'). Although these mothers were classified as adolescents, they did not identify as adolescents, but rather as young women. Except for one, these young women all lived in joint families. One of the women's husbands was abroad. Three women had eloped (love marriage) and the others had an arranged marriage.

Aspirations at different life stages

When asking participants about their biggest dreams, all younger and older girls referred to a future job: becoming a doctor, nurse, or teacher. The younger girls were unable to explain, however, why they aspired for that specific job, nor what the job would entail. The older girls justified their aspirations:

When my teacher would ask us what our "dreams" were, everyone would say they wanted to be a pilot, or an engineer or a doctor. But I would I say that I wanted to become a social

worker ever since I was a kid. My teacher would ask me why. And I would tell her that there are many problems in our society such as discrimination based on gender, caste, religion, or economic status. These have been abolished to a certain extent, but we have not been able to get rid of them completely. I wish to get rid of them all because I think that every person's blood is red. I do not see the need to discriminate anyone for any reason. (Geetu, 16 years)

Most young women had difficulties talking about aspirations for themselves, and often related this to school dropout and marriage:

My dream for the future? I don't think about it that way. It would have been better if I had studied more. I have a child now. I have to take her here and there. That's all for now. I don't dream of anything anymore. I can't think of anything, I just don't know what to dream of. (Susma, 17 years)

Young women mostly referred to earlier aspirations they held, defined here as 'lost aspirations', because they felt they had failed to realize those and now transferred their own educational aspirations onto their children, or sometimes younger siblings:

I want to educate my child and make her independent. To do some job. I want to educate her and make her a better person, by making her independent. I want her to go abroad and work. (Sarita, 18 years)

More intrinsic aspirations such as leading a happy life and becoming financially less dependent on others were commonly mentioned. Most young women wished to earn money, willing to take on any available work, such as tailoring, or working in people's fields to become more independent or generate income to support their families:

If my husband does not give me any money, I might or might not have money of my own. When my children have grown up, they might do whatever they want. If I had my own money, I would be able to do things. (Isha, 16 years)

Another common aspiration was for husbands to migrate, to Gulf countries or India. Girls expressed this as one way out of poverty or generating more income. One of the young women wished to migrate herself to be able to financially support her family if her husband would refuse to migrate.

Education was perceived as an important goal by both younger and older girls. While younger girls wished to just study and were generally not thinking about their futures much, older girls clearly expressed their wish to stay in (secondary) school and continue their education for as long as possible.

Marriage and having children did not automatically appear on younger and older girls' timelines. Most younger girls had not thought about marriage so far and had difficulties talking about this. None of the younger girls had thought about having children and further probing on this topic only resulted in long silences. In contrast to the younger girls, some older girls had thought about marriage although this topic still seemed to be difficult. Two girls mentioned a specific age (20 and 26 years), but it seemed as if the other two girls did not want to think (or further talk) about marriage:

I have not thought about marriage so far. I may think about it later. I have not even had a boyfriend yet! [Laughing] Other people are interested in these kinds of things, but I am not like that. (Geetu, 16 years)

All except one older girl had thought about having children. Views of having a maximum of two children after marriage were mainly linked to health:

We have to be strong to give birth to a child, right? We must be perfect. After delivering the child, our child will also be fine. We will be healthy as well. I think I will give birth at the age of 27 or 28 because by the age of 50 years old our menstruation also stops and that's why I think this age is suitable. (Geetu, 16 years)

The young women with one child expressed their wish for having another child, especially when they had no son yet. However, waiting for their first-borns to 'stand on their own two feet' (meant: going to school) before giving birth to another child, was highly preferred. One of the women who had two children and another who was pregnant with her second child, did not wish for more than two children as they believed it would be financially challenging for them and their families to care for more children.

Participants' timeline drawings did not include aspirations related to health or food, although such aspirations were voiced in relation to the other aspirations. However, when specifically asking about health aspirations, all girls consistently mentioned being clean, free from disease, able to work or help others, and having a balanced body (meant: 'not too thin, not too heavy'). However, unlike the youngest girls, older girls and young women were better able to explicitly express their health aspirations. This was especially true for those who felt unhealthy. Moreover, older girls seemed more aware of their body shape, and some of them worried about being too thin and wished to gain more weight. Young women would often express their health aspirations in relation to health worries:

No matter how much I eat, I seem to never be able to get fat. Seems like I have some disease! (Susma, 17 years)

Interestingly, older girls perceived health as a prerequisite to reach other goals by linking these to certain life outcomes. For instance, one girl drew an accident on her timeline, which caused her a hand injury, due to which she believed she would never be able to do the job she wished for. In addition to physical health, being free from 'tension' (stress) was mentioned by some older girls as essential for studying well and the ability to work:

A healthy mind means making our mind focus on one thing at a time ... (having) such thoughts in our minds make us feel free. (Daya, 16 years)

Like aspirations for health, dietary aspirations were not mentioned until prompted in which most participants noted that a healthy diet was fundamental for a healthy future. Older girls were more aware of the nutritional benefits of certain foods than the younger girls. Traditional homemade foods such as *dal bhat tarkari* (rice with pulses and vegetables), preferably inclusive of animal-source foods such as meat, dairy, or eggs, were mentioned by all girls as part of dietary aspirations. Moreover, all girls, but particularly the younger and older girls, aspired to eat sour and spicy food, which were mainly linked to foods purchased outside the home. For the younger girls, foods available out of their homes, such as *chatpat* (puffed rice with spices), *chow mein* (noodles), or *samosas* (fried stuffed pastry), *chow chow* (instant noodles), chocolate, ice

cream, and juice boxes, were preferred mostly because of their tastiness. Older girls also preferred such foods, but wished to balance it with homemade, healthier foods:

“Well, if we eat too much of the same food, it starts to lose its taste. Even sugar will then taste bitter if we eat too much of it” [...] “The foods that are prepared at home are good for us such as fruits, fish and meat, milk and green vegetables. But I think that we should also eat food outside of our home.” (Geetu, 16 years)

In comparison to the older girls, young women seemed even more concerned about eating nutritious foods, a gateway to keeping themselves and their children healthy. Having a diversified, but primarily traditional diet, consisting of animal-source foods (i.e. meat and eggs) and vegetables was aspired the most. Although at times, young women were able to get (junk) food from outside their homes, most did not explicitly aspire for those foods as they were not perceived as beneficial to their health.

Figure 1 provides an aspirations roadmap that includes the sub-themes grouped under the main theme aspirations. In this figure, the different colors (speech bubbles) indicate aspirations in different domains. The figure moreover shows how girls’ aspirations shift upon growing older.

Feelings about aspirations

The youngest girls often expressed their determination and hopefulness towards their futures. They felt able to realize or achieve their dreams, particularly those related to work, by studying hard and focusing on school and homework. They did not necessarily keep their aspirations hidden from others and would for instance share their dietary aspirations with older family members: ‘Sometimes I ask them (grandparents) to make *chapattis* and vegetables and at times I ask them not to make these foods over and over again [sighs]’ (Jamuna, aged 14), or tell their parents about their job aspirations. Younger girls felt confident they would be able to reach their goals, despite not being certain about how they could realize this:

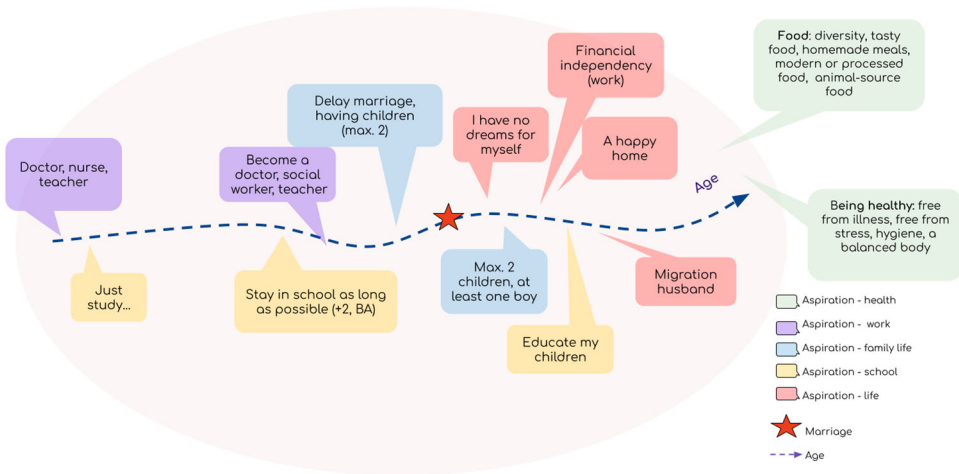


Figure 1. Aspirations roadmap.

Yes, I will become a nurse, but I do not know what it takes to become a nurse.’ (Ansu, 14 years).

Older girls’ stories, however, were characterized by feelings of being trapped between their own aspirations and reality. They adjusted their job-related aspirations according to what they perceived would be more realistic. Additionally, a lack of knowledge on how to realize these aspirations, for instance what educational trajectory would lead to becoming a doctor or teacher, was commonly mentioned as a barrier to achieving one’s aspirations. Older girls expressed mixed feelings about whether they would be able to reach their goals as they started noticing barriers. Although some were hopeful, others had lost confidence and seemed discouraged. A belief that their own determination would be important for achieving goals related to work, school, and health, was often mentioned:

Well, money is not everything. I need to be able to raise my voice and act with courage as well, so that my words will be my weapon. (Geetu, 16 years)

Because of perceived barriers, older girls commonly mentioned adjusting aspirations downwards. They often referred to childhood aspirations, but other options that were perceived as more realistic, were mentioned as well. One girl mentioned that her biggest wish was to become a doctor. As the interview continued, she started to talk about her ‘back up’ plan:

Now, when I look at the problems in my house, I think I’d also like to become a teacher. When we complete our studies, I want to become a teacher. Half of the girls here are like my elder sisters. I want to become a Nepali teaching teacher. (Daya, 16 years)

Older girls mentioned more short term goals, often related to learning a skill, such as tailoring. Feelings about incompatibility of aspirations, or clashes between aspirations and expectations were common. Looming marriage was seen as a major barrier to school-related aspirations, even though some girls had hoped they would be able to continue education after marriage. Loss of self-confidence also seemed to affect older girls’ school aspirations. The fear of failing in school was mentioned by some, and especially the idea that leaving school equaled marriage, frightened some:

“I have never failed so far, but now I am scared that I might fail. I think that if I fail now, then I can’t study further and that scares me” [...] “Like in our Muslim community, if I sit at home without doing anything then people start ask us about why I am not yet married.” (Daya, 16 years)

Young women commonly expressed hopelessness or resignation in relation to aspirations, which was often related to their perception of an unpredictable future and their dependence on husbands and in-laws:

I am not hopeful about anything. Only when your husband earns, you can hope that you can buy this, and you can do that. If your husband is not at home, there’s no hope. (Isha, 16 years)

Aside from having difficulties expressing their own aspirations during the interviews, young women noted that they did not often talk about their aspirations. For some, the exception seemed to be discussions with husbands about dietary- and family-life related aspirations (e.g. contraceptive use) even though they believed husbands had the final say.

A sense of hopelessness was often related to feelings of disappointment, regret, or sadness because of the inability to realize earlier aspirations. Lost aspirations included studying more, getting married later or not having eloped, and delaying childbirth. These life events, even though women had limited input in the decisions that had led to these events, and consequently their present lives, had not only forced women to give up on earlier aspirations, but also stopped them from thinking about other aspirations:

What should I tell you? I just wish that I had married at the age of 24, 25, but nothing did go according to our wishes! (Sarita, 18 years).

Marriage was seen as incompatible with studying and having children was perceived as holding women back from working:

If I had studied, I would have gotten a job, but now I don't think I could get any job. That's why I have not even thought about this. (Nisu, 19 years)

Others' influences on aspirations

Younger girls' network maps showed that parents were the most important persons in their lives, followed by friends, siblings, and teachers. Younger girls felt that their parents supported their studies and work aspirations. Fathers, specifically, were perceived as highly important for realizing dreams. They motivated girls to do well at school and were a source of inspiration telling them about the world outside of their village. Parental expectations in this life phase were mainly focused on education and some household responsibilities. Younger girls expressed a feeling of dependency on their fathers in relation to their school and work-related aspirations as they were the main ones responsible for financing their education, something that was also stressed by their mothers:

My mother tells me that my father has gone abroad to earn money for us ... So ... I must do well and become a nurse. This is why I think he is important to me. (Devi, 11 years)

Parents, through owning decision-making power, were important for realizing aspirations:

I asked her (mother) how much education she was going to give me. She said that she cannot give me more schooling after class 12, so ... (Arati, 11 years)

Younger girls felt restricted, mainly by female elders, to eat desired foods, including snack food available outside of the house. Although some received pocket money from parents or caretakers to buy food at school, most of these girls were told to avoid food from outside their homes, including snacks, and sour and sweet foods. Eating such foods, was associated with excessive bleeding during menstruation, disease-risks, or food safety concerns:

We should not eat too much chatpat or mother will scold me. [...] I am told not to eat foods from outside, because I might catch a cold. The foods near the roads are unhealthy as they might come in contact with smoke and dust. So, I am told not to eat those. (Jamuna, 14 years)

Only one girl mentioned that she was not allowed to eat some of the foods her brothers ate, such as Horlicks (relatively expensive fortified milk drink), meat, and milk. She also

had to prepare her meals separately, leaving out *dal*, and save her school-provided meals for her younger siblings.

Peers and older girls/women from the village were important in relation to younger girls' work-related aspirations. Friends would hold similar occupational aspirations (i.e. becoming a nurse), while some older girls and young women in the village served as role models. Peers were also important in relation to dietary aspirations: younger girls commonly expressed aspiring to eat the same foods their friends ate, outside of home and during school time:

[Outside], I eat noodles, *chatpat* and so on. *Chow mein*. We have to go outside, to a shop. I go with my friends. My friends pay for my snacks [...]. We can get noodles, chow mein and samosas as well. We, friends, we always eat chatpat together. (Devi, 11 years)

Older girls' network maps still pointed out the highly important role of fathers, especially in relation to realizing school- and job-related dreams:

Like, my mother takes care of everything at home, right? But my father supports us financially. So, we rely on him. He fulfills our dreams, so we should always keep him near us. (Daya, 16 years)

Older girls also mentioned receiving advice from elders (family or community) in relation to all life domains, ranging from how to behave at school, to food beliefs, and health advice:

My mother does not allow me to eat bananas, papayas and other fruit when I am menstruating because she says that it is a sin to eat those fruits during menstruation as they are supposed to be offered to the Gods [...] I do not think that it makes sense because it is not like that the fruits that I am eating will be offered to the Gods. I think what is important is that we should have a big heart. Only worshipping the Gods will never help you. It's better we give those foods to the poor people who do not have anything to eat. [...] So, I eat it anyway. I used to think that it was true when I was a kid. But now, I understand everything. (Geetu, 16 years)

Similar to what younger girls mentioned, fathers - often via mothers - had a major influence on older girls' school trajectories. In general, older girls felt that having supportive parents who showed trust in them to do well, at school, or life in general, was essential for them moving forward. Older siblings or sisters-in-law (if any) motivated them to pursue their dreams.

When we were small, my sister used to tell me about the things I should do, and she would also tell me to study. My sister has not studied that much, that's why she wants me to study hard and be someone I wish to be. I have a middle big sister (in-law) as well, who has studied up to class 8. She failed in class eight and left school forever. [...] He (brother) is the eldest person in our house. He has been taking care of us since my childhood. He tells me to study well. He also teaches us. My family wants me to become a doctor, they have dreamt about this. It's my dream as well, but because of our weak financial status, let's see how much I can study. He (brother) always tells me that he will earn money and send me to school so that I can become a doctor. 'You just study, don't worry about anything else'. (Daya, 16 years)

In joint families, the roles of sisters-in-law of taking on household workload or acting as mediators for older girls to take part in outside activities, became particularly important during this stage, were staying in school seemed to become one of older girls' priorities:

We used to work here before she got married to my elder brother. There was another sister here before, she used to work here, but when my elder sister(in-law) came here, we didn't have to work at all. We faced many difficulties while studying. Now she works here and helps others in our house so we get some free time to study and play. (Geetu, 16 years)

Older girls mentioned teachers, as a source of inspiration, motivation, and knowledge. Teachers knew how to reach goals, mainly related to school, work, food, and health:

She (teacher) is like a mother to me, for teaching me and helping me grow. She always told me that we should be good. She used to joke about how we would have a hard time if we would ever become a teacher, because of students like us [laughs]. She wanted us to become successful in life, she helped us dream big. (Geetu, 16 years)

For older girls, peers became even more important. Although older girls felt more restricted than younger girls to go out with friends, they referred to a feeling of freedom and being able to share their worries about their futures with others when doing so. Peers had moreover a positive influence on health and school-related aspirations. They made each other aware of healthy practices, such as maintaining hygiene, not getting involved in risky behaviors, and encouraging each other to study despite difficulties.

Older girls referred to restrictions and community pressure to adhere to certain norms as negatively influencing their aspirations. Parents would often express to older girls their concerns. They warned them about going the wrong track or going astray 'like other girls', referring to those who quit school, eloped with boys, got pregnant, or misused substances. Pressure from family or community members on older girls to get married, was mentioned as an important barrier to have a non-arranged (love) marriage or marrying at the age they wished. Girls also expected that upon marriage, their educational aspirations would be in the hands of their (future) in-laws and husbands:

If I find a nice home after marriage, and if my husband tells me to continue school, only then I will continue studying. (Daya, 16 years).

Another barrier to aspirations was being talked down by others, for instance through discouraging girls to move forward, gossiping, or showing envy. As a result, particularly the older girls mentioned feeling less confident or insecure about their capabilities.

Young women's network maps showed their husbands as the most (and sometimes only) important persons in their lives, followed by sisters- and brothers-in-law (if any), parents, and friends. Parents-in-law were mentioned by those living in joint families, but while two of them mentioned that their mother-in-law took care of them like their own mothers, the other four women did not get along well with their mothers-in-law. Some women were able to share their sorrow and happiness with husbands and referred to them as the most supportive ones in their lives. All felt dependent on their husbands. Husbands and parents-in-law were involved in most decisions related to health, work, family planning, and food. Consequently, despite their own health worries, women felt forced by others to have a child soon after getting married, and, in order to avoid community gossiping, they felt they needed to prove they were able to conceive, as illustrated by an extreme case:

My menstruation cycle was not good which is why I was not able to have a child. It used to cause me stomach pain and I got medicines for it. Then I got pregnant with this child. His

mother told him about my situation and that he should get me checked up to see whether I could have a child. My husband's mother used to quarrel with me thinking I was not able to have a child. That I was barren. [...] Now, she started saying that there is no reason for us to quarrel anymore. That there will be her grandson to take care of her in the future, she says I might not be her own blood, but her grandson is. (Isha, 16 years)

Husbands, or in-laws when living in joint families, mostly decided about what foods to eat and women had to ask their husbands to bring home certain foods, such as meat. The only exception came from a woman living in a nuclear family, who felt in charge of what to eat. While some women felt that their mothers-in-law were supportive of their dietary wishes, others were controlled heavily by them:

I don't eat in front of them, even when I eat while hiding from them, they look at me through the window and check on me, what I am eating. That's why I sit on the bed and eat it there. If I don't have to eat, I cover it. They are very jealous. (Lata, 19 years)

Most of the women who wished to work to support their families had not talked about this with their families as they did not feel confident their in-laws or husbands would allow them to work:

My husband tells me that he won't let me work as long as he's alive. He tells me that I should work in our own fields and that he will feed me with his earnings. I should not think about what to do, and how to do this, because I'm a wife. (Isha, 16 years)

In relation to all aspirations, women mentioned female friends and relatives to be important. Food sharing with other women in times of need or scarcity was commonly mentioned, but also small financial help or loans from other women were mentioned as helpful to cover food- or health-related expenses, especially for their children.

Influence of gender norms

For the youngest girls, socio-cultural gender norms did not seem to be directly related to aspirations. However, these girls referred to a good *kishori* (adolescent girl) as behaving deferentially: being polite, living in harmony with others, taking care of younger siblings, and obeying elders. All girls were expected to do household work (i.e. cleaning, cooking) starting at the age of eight or nine and not to go outside too much:

It would be best if she doesn't go to other houses even when they call her. She should stay home and practice knitting. They say that we should not go to other houses and, we should stay home. (Arati, 11 years)

At the same time, young girls were expected to perform well at school. Household and school expectations sometimes clashed:

I am worried about my school, my studies. [That] I won't be able to show my copies to the teachers at school who teach subjects on the day that I do not go [to school]. All my friends will be able to show their copies ... , and, also, I won't be able to learn about the things they teach that day and miss out on homework. [...] I could not go to school today [because of working in fields] and can't show him my homework even though he specifically asked for it. (Arati, 11 years)

While younger girls did not yet perceive such norms as a barrier to their aspirations, older girls started to perceive norms as restricting their aspirations. Respecting elders,

living in harmony with others, and being subservient, were important traditional values that resulted in having to ask for permission to study further or work and prevented girls from speaking against elders' decisions:

It is our tradition that my mother's brother decides for our marriage. In our Muslim community. After all, for example in our community, we can't get just married if we like each other. If someone does that, villagers and the community will betray us. They will talk badly about the girl, that she did this, and so on. (Daya, 16 years)

Some of the older girls voiced their wish to work to save money for their own education or to support the household. However, they were restricted from doing so as they were expected to commit to household work and not go outside. Being confined to home was associated with a feeling of being trapped and as a barrier to aspirations:

If I go visit new places with someone, then villagers tell my mother about this, behind my back. They then turn my mother against me. And then my mother would tell me there is nothing good about roaming around all the time and that I should study. If we (girls) had enough resources and power, we wouldn't have to fear anyone. We should also (be able to) visit places. But in this village, we can't go out visiting new places, places near to us. We are like a frog in a well in this village. That's how my village is. (Daya, 16 years)

All girls, except for those married, held negative associations with the word *kishorawastha* (adolescence), which started according to most interviewees upon the first menstruation. Being an adolescent girl was being associated with weakness, having a 'weaker heart' than boys and behaving bad, rebellious, or naughty:

That word (adolescence) makes me angry, I feel the term is offensive, I don't like it. I think it's belittling, and it makes me angry. I get angry when someone calls me like that, people from my home and outsiders as well, they call me when they get angry with me. My father does not, my mother does. [...] People think badly about it. They think that during adolescence they, boys and girls, are attracted to each other, people talk badly about them. (Sharmila, 15 years)

Protecting both younger and older girls by telling them to avoid boys, was mostly related to parents' general fear that girls would elope with boys or engage in sexual behavior, disrespect elders, or get involved with bad friends. Ultimately, guarding girls' social reputation was associated with the idea that marriage is a girl's destiny. Making a mistake, would result in a girl's and therefore her family's broken reputation. This influenced girls' choices related to future aspirations such as their aspired age of marriage:

My mother tells me to be careful not to be like others and go astray from the person I am supposed to be. She tells me that a girl is like a pot made from mud which once broken is impossible to put together in one piece. (Geetu, 16 years)

On the other hand, some older girls mentioned positive changes in traditional cultural practices in relation to their educational and marital aspirations. For instance, grandparents were referred to as having 'old-fashioned' views on keeping girls out of school or getting them married from about 12 years, whilst communities and parents had started to change their views and commonly suggested 20 years as the appropriate age of marriage.

While younger girls had only started to learn about prevailing norms, and older girls were balancing between social norms, expectations, and aspirations, young women

had conformed to these norms and expectations. The young women living in joint families were mostly confined to their homes, while the women living in a nuclear unit experienced a sense of freedom to move around and buying the food they wished for. Women furthermore referred to qualities of a good daughter-in-law as being submissive and cooperative. They believed their duty was to share with, and help others, respect the household hierarchy, and to not show any form of greediness. This also included not talking about problems outside of the house which led women to self-silence or self-sacrifice for the family, for instance, through hiding their own aspirations:

We should not talk about household matters outside our homes. We should just take care of our husbands. We should not talk to other people about things happening here [...] He (husband) tells me that I get jealous from seeing what other people have. He tells me he has been earning, but that we are just not able to save. He tells me I'm smart enough to know that I should not tell anyone about all those things, and that we will lose our respect if I do. (Isha, 16 years)

Structural barriers to aspirations

While all girls mentioned a lack of money in relation to aspirations, the extent to which it was perceived as a barrier varied between the groups of girls. For the youngest girls, a lack of money was only related to not being able to buy snacks and continuing higher education:

Well, there could be a problem going to school if I lack school supplies. (Arati, 11 years).

Older girls mentioned that their educational aspirations mostly depended on one's household's financial status, or on the financial status of one's future husband's family. With education seen as the pathway to future jobs, girls also mentioned that they would have to move to larger cities (e.g. Kathmandu) for further studies to become a doctor. Marital aspirations were negatively affected by persisting dowry practices, particularly in the Muslim community. Money was also seen as a means to afford nutritious food and fulfill dietary aspirations. For young women, having sufficient financial resources was a goal in itself to lead a happy life and feed their families:

I am told to eat *dal bhat*, or rice and vegetables. It is not good to eat a lot of fish and meat. It means we must spend a lot of money. If there's money, I can eat meat with rice. If not, I should eat vegetables with rice. We have to spend a lot of money. If we had the money, we could have everything. (Isha, 16 years).

Other structural forces facilitating or constraining aspirations that were mentioned by older girls only, were the geographical location and infrastructure of villages. For instance, food availability and seasonality dictated what they were able to eat. Finally, for older girls, a lack of (quality) schooling opportunities in the area was mentioned as a barrier to educational and work aspirations.

Discussion

This paper aimed to provide a holistic and comprehensive understanding of adolescent girls' life aspirations, with a particular focus on - but not limited to - school, work,

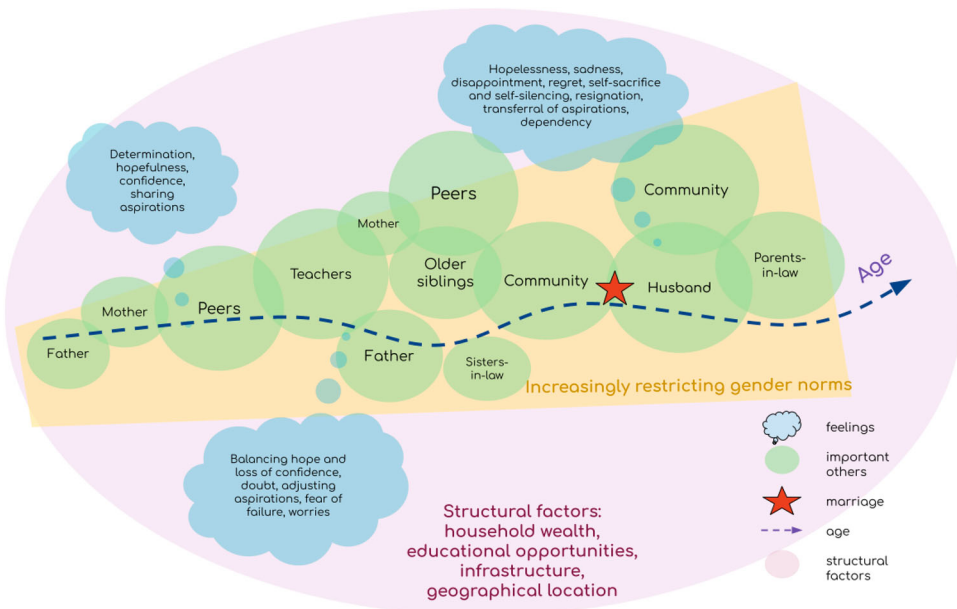


Figure 2. Roadmap of aspirations showing how feelings towards aspirations, important others, gender norms, and structural factors influence girls' aspirations.

family life, food, and health, as well as to describe how context and life experiences shape these aspirations in Western-Nepal. By framing aspirations within a life course perspective and positioning adolescence on a developmental continuum, this study is among the first to highlight the distinct and unique narratives of younger girls (11–15), older girls (15–17), and young women (married, 16–19). These narratives underscore the heterogeneity among adolescents. Findings advance previous studies by going beyond the socio-economic determinants of aspirations to indicate the influence of different factors and actors at different stages of adolescence. In [figure 2](#), a visual summary shows how girls' feelings (blue), important others (green), increasingly restrictive gender norms (yellow), and wider structural factors such as financial status and geographical location (purple) influence girls' aspirations throughout adolescence. The relative importance of these influences is expressed by the size of the shapes.

Younger girls voiced high levels of hope, optimism, and big dreams. In particular, these girls had ambitious educational and occupational aspirations, but they were mostly focused on the here and now. Hence, other thoughts about their future family life, underlying motivations for specific aspirations, or perceived (future) barriers and opportunities to aspirations were largely absent from their narratives. This is not surprising as future-orientated thinking and seeing consequences of certain actions becomes stronger with age (Nurmi 1991; Lindstrom Johnson, Blum, and Cheng 2014). Older girls were balancing and navigating. They felt that their aspirations started to clash with reality, social expectations, and societal norms. Consequently, they adjusted their aspirations, as has been documented by other studies in both low- and high-income contexts (Winter 2016; Gutman and Akerman 2008). Findings show that staying and performing well in school was one of the most important aspirations of the older adolescent girls, not least

because education may prevent girls from marrying early (Marphatia et al. 2020). Young women voiced limited aspirations for themselves: they had resigned to their new lives upon marriage and shifted to aspiring for a better life for their families and children. Their stories were also filled with pessimism, sadness, and regret about lost aspirations. The decrease in hopefulness and optimism over time is worrisome as pessimism, hopelessness, and negative expectations towards the future have been associated with poorer mental health status (Lindstrom Johnson, Blum, and Cheng 2014). Adjusting aspirations downwards may result in fatalism or an aspirations failure, which ultimately reinforces inequalities, including poverty and social inequities (Dalton, Ghosal, and Mani 2016).

Findings connect to the four key elements of life course theory. First, adolescents' narratives underscore the interdependent nature of aspirations. Educational and occupational aspirations were intertwined, and dietary (food) aspirations were part of health aspirations. Interestingly, the latter two were often not talked about as part of life aspirations in itself, but rather seen as fundamental to other life outcomes, or in relation to other aspirations, such as family formation. This finding is in line with a quantitative study on adolescent girls' aspirations in Nepal, which indicated the high importance of good nutrition and health for girls' aspired futures (Madjdian et al. 2021). Aspirations are embedded in time and place and influenced by structural factors, such as geographical location, better education opportunities, or food availability. For instance, living in areas with poor infrastructure may block girls to aspire for jobs requiring higher or professional skills or to aspire for higher educational grades. Similarly, food environments influenced dietary aspirations. Societal changes were mentioned as positively influencing educational and marital aspirations. Increased awareness on the importance of girls' education, or the detrimental effects of early or child marriage, have resulted in gender parity in primary school enrollment and a decrease in child marriage in Nepal (LeVine 2019; MacQuarrie, Juan, and Fish 2019). Despite progress, however, the combination of poverty, patriarchal norms, socio-cultural practices including dowry, and the social value of investing in girls and protecting their honor, is still deeply rooted in society and thereby influencing aspirations. In contrast to the large strand of literature on poverty and aspirations (Mathur, Malhotra, and Mehta 2001; Dercon and Krishnan 2009) and a previous study on the determinants of aspirations (Madjdian et al. 2021), poverty did not emerge from girls' stories as the largest visible barrier to aspirations, although it was mentioned in relation to further education and food.

Secondly, clear differences in aspirations between younger and older girls and younger women highlight how life events (timing of lives) and related social transitions play an important role. While younger girls had not yet reached this stage, older girls had experienced events that led to a significant social transition and a change of aspirations. For instance, those who had health worries or who had been involved in an accident, voiced explicit health aspirations. Young women regretted dropping out of school, marrying, and having children early. Achieving financial independence and having a happy home was stressed by young women, while taking care of children combined with restrictive gender norms, were perceived as barriers to working. Older, yet unmarried adolescent girls, kept high educational and occupational aspirations and wished to delay marriage until achieving those aspirations. The expectation of marriage was seen as an event that would eventually force older girls to lower their aspirations in almost all life

domains. In Nepal, marriage is often associated with school dropout, and a handing over of decision-making power in several life domains to one's husband and in-laws (Sekine and Hodgkin 2017).

Findings underscore the notion of linked lives, or social relations, in shaping aspirations. Our study advances the extensive evidence on the influence of others on aspirations by showing how different actors influence aspirations through different stages of adolescence. Younger girls had no difficulties expressing their aspirations and did not focus on others influencing or restricting those aspirations. Moreover, many younger girls drew their aspirations from those in their aspiration window (Ray 2006), mostly peers or older girls (who served as role models) in the village. Despite parents being important persons in younger girls' lives, they did not perceive them as actively influencing their aspirations, other than through expecting them to study and restricting them from eating certain foods. Older girls expressed the influence of others in relation to their aspirations, such as increased encouragement and motivation by older siblings, teachers, peers, and sisters-in-law, but also discouragement by members of the community and restricting parental expectations. Young women's aspirations were dependent on husbands and parents-in-law, as they reported to have limited decision-making power which also resulted in them not expressing their feelings or aspirations.

Finally, increasingly restrictive gender norms affect girls' sense of agency and aspirations. In Nepal's predominantly patriarchal society, gender norms and ideals surrounding being a good *kishori* (adolescent girl), young woman, wife, or daughter-in-law are reflected in age-dependent restricted freedom or mobility outside homes, shyness, and limited decision-making power (Grossman-Thompson 2016). Domestic seclusion and 'social surveillance' by parents and relatives, and after she marries, by her in-laws and relatives' are meant to protect a girl's social honor, to prevent girls to elope with boys or engage in sexual activity (Grossman-Thompson 2016, 43). Although younger girls were familiar with such norms and values, they did not (yet) seem to impact their aspirations. Agency varied by age- or life-stage: younger girls felt that they had less control over their futures than older girls. Young women living with husbands and in-laws felt less in charge of their lives compared to unmarried older girls. Young women's aspirations were directly restricted by gender norms and the need to live up to important values of putting family needs first (collective aspirations), protecting family harmony, and practicing selflessness. Resulting feelings of ambivalence, hiding and not expressing aspirations, are in line with the construct of self-silencing or self-sacrifice. Women in Nepal's society are often expected to act subordinate and accept inequality in society: 'pursuing one's own goal is superseded by a collectivist emphasis on family welfare and serving needs of family members' (Jack, Pokharel, and Subba 2010, 147). Hence, silencing one's own needs and aspirations or sacrificing for others, such as for instance transferring educational aspirations onto children or putting aside one's aspirations related to having children, are inherent to being a good *kishori*, wife, or woman in general. Hart and Brando, in their study on youth aspirations and agency, show that youth with hidden aspirations often had less agency than youth who did voice their aspirations, and that those with 'shared' or, what we defined as collective aspirations, were less agentic as well (Hart and Brando 2018). When viewing agency and aspirations as interrelated and dynamically changing over time, however, the

findings of this study imply that when girls are able to not only see opportunities but also to act on these opportunities within boundaries of social structures, their sense of agency may increase. This, in turn, may empower them to foster and ultimately realize their aspirations (DeJaeghere 2018). The words of Daya (16 years), who expressed that she felt 'like a frog in a well' in her village, perfectly illustrate this. Daya was able to see opportunities and a future for herself. However, she felt unable to act on these due to increasing restrictive gendered roles and other restrictions such as household poverty. While she was highly motivated to improve her life and consequently that of her family, she felt restricted to act on these – to her – visible opportunities.

Strengths and limitations

There are some potential limitations in this study that could be addressed in future research. First, our study was conducted in a specific region in Western-Nepal which makes findings less generalizable to other regions of Nepal. However, participants were from the randomly selected *SII* adolescent girls panel which had a generally high response rate. Future research would benefit from studying how aspirations differ across Nepal's diverse geographies, as well as between urban and rural areas. Second, in translation from audio to Nepali script, and then to English, some data might have been lost. However, all translated interviews were carefully checked against the Nepali transcripts, and when unclear, transcripts were discussed and checked against the audio recordings. Moreover, the participatory and creative approach to data collection, in which network maps and timeline drawings were used to gain rich data, allowed girls to be the tellers of their own stories. Combining these elicitation methods in creative and flexible ways provided safe spaces for girls to co-create data and openly talk about their aspirations and lives. At the same time, these methods provided opportunities for the interviewer to confirm or further deepen girls' responses, thereby decreasing risks of misinterpretation, especially when language or (young) age was a challenge (Mannay 2015). These methods were especially helpful to support the youngest girls to share their stories and they decreased power distances between interviewees and the interviewer. Interviews were discussed right after and combined with notes into summaries. These summaries were used in the first step of data analysis. Also, because the researchers stayed near the participants during data collection, any issues requiring clarification were easily resolved. Third, although findings show that aspirations differ by stage of adolescence, our data provides a snapshot of girls' aspirations, as we did not follow these girls over longer periods of time. Hence, we are unable to show how girls' aspirations change over time. By using timelines, however, we were able to discuss with girls how their past aspirations had changed, retrospectively. Future, longitudinal research that takes a life course perspective could track the same girls over time and study how aspirations and their determinants fluctuate over time, as well as study if and how girls' aspirations are or can be achieved.

Implications

Aspirations are powerful engines of progress through positively influencing behavior and choices and may facilitate a healthy transition into adulthood (Hart 2016). Findings

point towards opportunities for policies and programs to foster adolescent girls' aspirations at specific stages of adolescence and at several levels. First, allowing and supporting girls to talk about aspirations through for instance life-skills programs, alongside creating community awareness on the importance of supporting girls' aspirations, is a first step. However, it is essential to actively involve others, from early adolescence onwards and throughout specific stages of adolescence, to translate awareness into supportive communities. Moreover, it is vital that girls are not only able to start seeing opportunities for their futures (which is inevitable due to societal changes), but also that they are supported to work towards these futures. Findings underscore the importance of role models and their visibility in communities, but also how male members of the family, particularly fathers, older brothers, or husbands influence girls' aspirations. Future research on their perceptions and expectations in relation to adolescent girls' aspirations might further support developing interventions that empower girls to start or keep aspiring for their own futures. Teachers and schools, in particular, have an important role in motivating and showing girls how to realize aspirations, or if not realistic, how to adjust aspirations in healthy ways. Finally, structural changes, such as addressing adverse socio-cultural and gendered norms that restrict girls from aspiring for themselves, addressing inequity and poverty issues, and creating opportunities for quality education are vital. For girls who are out of school and for those who are married and/or have children, skill-training programs or supporting girls to see alternative futures are pivotal to sustain hopefulness and foster aspirations.

Acknowledgements

This study is part of a larger study on adolescents' life aspirations and nutrition in Nepal, conducted in collaboration with the USAID-funded *Suaahara II* program in Nepal. The authors would like to acknowledge the contributions of the *SII* head office staff in Kathmandu for their support with the design and logistics of this study. We highly appreciate the support of *SII* district-based staff, particularly the Community Nutrition Facilitators and Field Supervisors for the logistic support in the study areas. We would like to thank the research assistant and translators. Finally, we are grateful for the girls who shared their unique life stories and dreams with us.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by a PhD fellowship grant of The Edema-Steernberg Foundation, a charitable institution registered with the Dutch Chamber of Commerce (number 64 61 64 60) and carried out in collaboration with the USAID-funded *Suaahara II* (2017-2023) program (No. AID-367-A-16-00006), which is implemented by Helen Keller International, in Nepal.

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