

ADULT LEARNERS' EXPERIENCES OF LIFELONG LEARNING IN NEPAL:  
NARRATIVES OF WOMEN

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A Dissertation

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## AN ABSTRACT

of the dissertation of *Prativa Rai* for the degree *Master of Philosophy in Education (Development Studies)* presented on 28 March 2025, entitled *Adult Learners' Experiences of Lifelong Learning in Nepal: Narratives of Women*

## APPROVED BY

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The study presents the lifelong learning experiences of adult women learners of Non-Formal Education (NFE). These women either never had the opportunity to attend school or dropped out because of their socio-economic condition and the social restrictions in education. This study uses narrative research methodology and Amartya Sen's capability approach as a theory. The study explores how the participants' socioeconomic background contributed to their exclusion from education, leading to their capability deprivation. Capability deprivation occurs when individuals don't get the opportunity or freedom to use the available resources for their full-fledged functioning. The participants' stories portray that they did not feel respected or confident, and were rejected from opportunities due to their limited education.

The strong realization of capability deprivation motivated them to join NFE in their later stage of life. After participating in NFE, they have felt the changes in their capabilities. Their engagement in learning at NFE boosted their self-confidence and self-esteem while dealing with people either at work, the bank, or children's schools. In addition, they can independently travel, perform financial work, and express their feelings through writing. Similarly, education has given them the freedom to lead the life of their choice and also made them feel more responsible to society and people.

The women's stories of struggle and change can motivate other women to challenge the existing social barriers and participate in lifelong learning. Further, the

study's findings can inform the programs and policies targeted at women's education and lifelong learning. The study concludes that learning can take place at any time and place, as lifelong learning. Individuals continue to learn to achieve capabilities in the form of freedom so that they can pursue the life they value.

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28 March 2025

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## सोध सार

विकास अध्ययनमा दर्शनशास्त्रको स्नातकोत्तर डिग्रीको लागि प्रतिभा राईको शोध प्रबन्धको शिर्षक “नेपालका प्रौढ सिकारुहरुको जीवनपर्यन्त सिकाइको अनुभव : महिलाहरुको संकथन ” १५ चैत २०८१ मा प्रस्तुत गरिएको थियो।

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उप. प्रा. सुरेश गौतम, पिएचडी

### शोध निर्देशक

यस अध्ययनमा प्रौढ सिकारुहरुले अनौपचारिक शिक्षाको माध्यमबाट प्राप्त गरेको जीवनपर्यन्त सिकाइको अनुभवलाई प्रस्तुत गरिएको छ । जीवनको पूर्वार्धमा सामाजिक अवरोध तथा कमजोर आर्थिक अवस्थाको कारणबाट विद्यालय जाने अवसरबाट बञ्चित भएका वा विद्यालय छोड्नु परेका र वर्तमान अवस्थामा अनौपचारिक शिक्षामा आवद्ध महिला सिकारुहरुलाई यस अध्ययनको सहभागीका रूपमा लिइएका छन् ।

अनुसन्धान पद्धतिका रूपमा Narrative Inquiry तथा अमञ्च सेनको क्षमता दृष्टिकोण (Capability Approach) को सिद्धान्तलाई यस अनुसन्धानमा प्रयोग गरिएको छ । सामाजिक तथा आर्थिक परिस्थिती नै सहभागीहरुको शैक्षिक सिमितताको प्रमुख कारण रहेको यस अध्ययनमा पाइएको छ । क्षमता दृष्टिकोण का अनुसार आफूसँग श्रोत भए पनि त्यस श्रोतलाई उपयोग गर्न असक्षम हुनुको अवस्थालाई Capability deprivation वा क्षमता सीमितता भन्ने गरिन्छ । सहभागीहरुमा पढ्ने लेख्ने क्षमताको कमीको कारणले उनीहरुप्रति सम्मानजनक व्यवहार नभएको, उनीहरुमा आत्मविश्वासको कमी हुनुका साथै राजनीतिक, सामाजिक, आर्थिक अवसरहरुको पहुँचबाट लाभान्वीत हुन नसकेको अवस्थालाई यस अध्ययनले प्रष्ट पारेको छ ।

आत्मसम्मानमा कमी र जीवनमा आएका अवसरहरु प्राप्त गर्न नसकेको कारणले क्षमता विकासमा पछि पर्नु परेको महसुस गरी महिलाहरु अनौपचारिक शिक्षामा सहभागी भएको यस

अध्ययनले देखाएको छ । अनौपचारिक शिक्षामा सहभागी भए पश्चात उनीहरूको क्षमतामा अभिवृद्धि भएको साथै आत्मविश्वास पनि बढेको अध्ययनमा पाइएको छ । अनौपचारिक शिक्षाबाट प्राप्त सिप र ज्ञानको कारण कार्यालय , बैंक र आफ्नो बालबालिकाहरूको विद्यालयमा सहज तरिकाले अन्तरकृया र आवश्यक काम गर्नसक्ने क्षमताको विकास भई आफूमा आत्मसम्मान बढेको अनुभव गरेको सहभागीहरूले बताएका छन् । यसैगरी स्वतन्त्रताका साथ यात्रा गर्नु, विश्वासका साथ आर्थिक कारोवार गर्नु र आफ्नो भावनालाई लेखन तथा स्वच्छन्द वाचन मार्फत प्रस्तुत गर्न सहभागीहरू सबल भएका छन् ।

प्रौढ सिकारुहरूका संघर्ष र परिवर्तनका अनुभवहरूले विविध सामाजिक तथा पारिवारिक अवरोधका कारणले गर्दा शिक्षाको अवसरबाट बञ्चित भएका महिलाहरूलाई उक्त सामाजिक मूल्यमान्यतालाई चुनौती दिदै जीवनपर्यन्त शिक्षामा समावेश हुनको लागि उत्प्रेरित गर्दछ । त्यसैगरी अध्ययनबाट आएको परिणामले अनौपचारिक तथा जीवनपर्यन्त सिकाइसँग सम्बन्धित कार्यक्रम तथा नीति निर्माणमा सहयोग गर्नेछ । सिकाइ कुनै समय परिधिमा मात्रै समिति नभई जीवनभर चल्ने प्रकृया रहेको निष्कर्ष यो अध्ययनको रहेको छ, जसलाई अनौपचारिक शिक्षाले सहयोग गरेको छ । यस अध्ययनले के पुष्टि गर्दछ भने हरेक व्यक्तिले जीवनपर्यन्त सिकाइलाई आत्मसात गरी आफ्नो क्षमता विकास गर्नका साथै आफूले मूल्यवान वा अर्थपूर्ण मानेको जीवन जिउन सक्षम हुनेछन् ।

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१५ चैत २०८१

प्रतिभा राई

उपाधि उम्मेदवार

This dissertation entitled *Adult Learners' Experiences of Lifelong Learning in Nepal: Narratives of Women* presented by *Prativa Rai* on 28 March 2025.

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I understand that my dissertation will become a part of the permanent collection of the library of Kathmandu University. My signature below authorizes the release of my dissertation to any reader upon request for scholarly purposes.

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## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is my original work, and it has not been submitted for candidature for any other degree at any other university.

.....

28 March 2025

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## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my beloved late grandmother, parents, sisters, family, friends, and to all women who continue to rise and fight against all odds.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

APPEAL	Asia-Pacific Program of Education for All
CEHRD	Center for Education and Human Resource Development (CEHRD).
CLC	Community Learning Center
EFA	Education for All
GoN	Government of Nepal
HDI	Human Development Index
LLL	Lifelong Learning
MoE	Ministry of Education
MoEST	Ministry of Education, Science and Technology
NCE	National Campaign for Education
NFE	Non-Formal Education
NFEC	Non-Formal Education Center
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OOSC	Out-of-School Children
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SSDP	School Sector Development Program
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund



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## CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

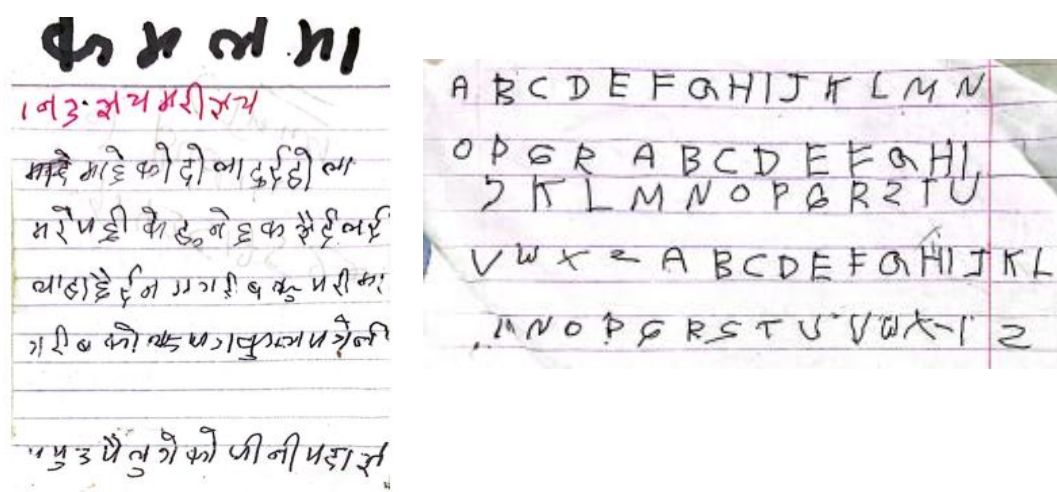
My study presents the adult learners' experiences of lifelong learning and the changes they have acquired after joining non-formal education. I have started this chapter with the story of my grandmother, who continued to learn to read and write till her last days of life. In addition, this chapter includes the purpose of my study, statement of problem, purpose of study, research question, rationale, and delimitation of my study.

### Personal Aspiration for Adult Education

It was 2018, and I was cleaning my grandmother's room when I found a sheet of paper under her pillow, filled with her attempts at writing the English alphabet. With curiosity, I asked her about it. I learned that she had started practicing them during her stay in the United Kingdom with her son, my uncle. I was amazed to see her willingness to learn, even in her 70s. She shared her challenges, *"Everyone had to go to work, and I was the only one to stay home. During the day, I roamed around nearby. There were boards mentioning street names, but I could not read them"*. Since she could not read the location written in English, she used to roam only around nearby places. She added, *"When there was no one at home, I had to receive deliveries, and they needed the receiver's signature. If we could not sign, they returned the goods"*. She learned to sign her name in her 70s and was eager to learn. It was fun to listen to her trying new words and pronunciations.

**Figure 1**

*My Grandmother's Handwriting-Practicing Nepali Sentences and English Alphabets*



She often reflected on her early days, lamenting the practices that prevented girls from attending school. She learned the basics of writing and reading Nepali, allowing her to read newspapers and stories. She had her lifelong habit of reading and learning. Her memory of dates and events made her the family's date reminder and recorder. Around the dinner table, we would gather eagerly to listen to her share the day's national and international news. I was especially fond of listening to folktales and her life events. She had a mobile phone, a simple one to use to make and receive calls. The contacts were in Nepali, so she could call us by reading out our names.

One of my most vivid memories is accompanying her to the bank to withdraw her pension. Her words are still in my mind saying, "*I have grandchildren to help me at my bank; if not, how could it be done? Life is dark if you don't know how to read and write*". Similarly, my mother joined a literacy class at 50, and it was her happiness to learn English words and write them neatly in her copy. She could not continue her classes because of her health issues, but she still showed her willingness to read and write whenever she had time. My mother often expresses her despair over being unable to attend school while her brothers got the opportunity for education. She got married at an early age, and she never thought of attending school afterward.

My grandmother and mother did not attend school, as it was not common for girls to attend school at their age. They were responsible for caring for their families and household chores, and were deprived of educational opportunities.

I have had the personal experience of witnessing the disappointment in my grandmother and my mother for not pursuing education. Despite their age, I have observed their unwavering willingness to learn. Similarly, my decade-long experience working with women has provided insights into how social context restricts their participation in education and other opportunities. Through interaction and observations during my work, I came to understand that gender roles often confine women to household responsibilities, and their early marriage further limits their opportunity to pursue education.

These personal experiences at home and in the field sparked my interest in exploring the stories of women who have joined NFE to continue their learning despite their age.

### **Women's Access to Education in Nepal**

The experiences of my mother and grandmother mirror those of many Nepali women who did not get educational opportunities. Nepal's patriarchal society is a

challenge to women's access to equal opportunities and power exercise. (Asian Development Bank [ADB], 2010). These inequalities in power and resources are deeply rooted in social norms that restrict women's participation in education and other public spheres. For instance, as in my grandmother's and mother's case, gender discrimination begins within the family with labor division and responsibility for resources. Women, in particular, are loaded with household chores but are often denied resource access, including parental property. Society and family expect to leave their parents' home after marriage (Dahal et al., 2021).

Despite these constraints, the study of Betts (2004) illustrates that women strongly desire to learn and perceive education as a means to a better future. However, a patriarchal system often exhibits symbolic violence, restricting women from pursuing education; for example, in the study of Betts, women shared that their husbands were not ready to let them attend literacy classes, and they participated despite their opposition, and their participation did not last long.

### **Non-Formal Education and Lifelong Learning**

Curiosity is a source of information, and learning is essential for a person's growth (Lengrand, 1975, as cited in Regmi, 2020). Mobility, population displacement, the climate crisis, and technological change impact all nations globally, and Nepal is no exception. With the advancement of technology and changes in culture and lifestyles, people have experienced the complexity of daily living. The complexity of modern living seeks adaptability, which means people must be receptive to change and eager to learn throughout their lives (United Nations Educational, Scientific & Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2022).

To adapt to these changes in the physical world, people intend to acquire knowledge and skills regardless of age and situation (Kempfer, 2009); people have to continuously learn and develop across their life span, from the cradle to the grave (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 1996). Globally, it is accepted that learning takes place throughout life, and it is not limited to age and educational institutions.

Learning takes place throughout life, which is not confined to formal education, and non-formal learning embodies lifelong learning (Tuijnman & Bostrom, 2002). Non-formal education offers lifelong learning opportunities to adults unable or unlikely to enroll or re-enter formal education, and it helps bring out-of-school individuals into formal education. NFE is an addition, alternative, and/or complement

to formal education in a process of lifelong learning. NFE has been recognized for its innovative learning approach to developing human capabilities and social cohesion (Yasunga, 2014). NFE covers programs for adult and youth literacy and education for out-of-school children and livelihood development programs (UNESCO, 2012). NFE complements formal education to achieve the SDGs' adult learning targets (Rogers, 2019) and provides a lifelong learning environment for all ages and backgrounds. Lifelong learning is purposeful learning that is carried out to acquire knowledge, skills, and competency for personal, professional, and social growth.

As S. Acharya (2025) stated, NFE is an umbrella term that includes programs ranging from basic literacy to flexible, alternative school and outreach programs. Women's schools (study area) have received approval from the government to run as a class for adults under the NFE framework (personal communication, February 12, 2025). Similarly, Sharma (2014) states that women's school is an initiative of non-formal education, providing opportunities to those willing to continue their education.

### **Statement of the Problem**

In countries like Nepal, unequal power and resource distribution have created gender inequality, resulting in a lower literacy rate in women than men (Khan, 2013). Specifically, factors such as poverty, household responsibilities, and gender roles are reasons for girls' dropping out and not attending school. At the same time, disadvantaged and marginalized communities are at higher risk of dropout (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2020). With the emergence of technology and modernization, women without education struggle to adapt, increasing the gap between the literate and non-literate (UNESCO, 2022). The women want to continue pursuing education in alternative ways. The non-formal education program in Nepal has become a gateway for women to literacy and helps women to deal with social issues, especially early marriage, domestic violence, and discriminatory practices, among many other practices (Karki & Mix, 2018)

I argue that either formal or non-formal education is crucial in challenging discriminatory practices and empowering women to access resources (Dahal et al., 2021). Non-formal education, in particular, is vital in bringing girls from underrepresented communities into education (UNICEF, 2020). Therefore, education is significant in women's lives, and its importance is even higher in countries where women have to challenge gender inequality and societal structure. Mengistie (2022)

emphasizes that education empowers women to be in decision-making processes, which is often hindered for non-literate women.

The importance of education in human development is widely recognized, as reflected in SDG 4 on Education. SDG 4 promotes lifelong learning and aims to provide inclusive and equitable quality education for all. NFE, as part of lifelong learning, adopts a participatory approach to learning and has been shown in Dahal et al. (2021), Mengistie (2022), and UNICEF (2020) to transform women's lives by enhancing their mobility, participation in decision-making positions, and empower them economically, socially and politically. Conversely, the inability to read or write is a barrier to income activities, resulting in poor health outcomes for the family and low self-esteem (Mtika & Abbott, 2023).

The ability to read and write connects women to today's world (Stromquist, 1990), but there are barriers for them to access education. The patriarchal society and social norms promoting early marriage and gender discrimination force girls to drop out (Acharya et al., 2020). On the other hand, women are willing to pursue education despite social restrictions and discrimination (Betts, 2004). So, this phenomenon developed a curiosity to find out the reasons for women pursuing education at their later age. The study explores the social structure and its impacts on women's capability deprivation and the challenges of women having limited education. In addition, it establishes a relationship between their challenges and motivation for learning, and ultimately, it seeks to present an understanding of how capability achieved through education impacts the well-being of individuals.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study aimed to explore the stories of Nepali women who are practicing lifelong learning. The purpose of the study is to explore the reasons for women to join NFE and the changes they have experienced after participating in NFE.

### **Research Questions**

This study tried to find out the answers to the following research questions,

1. How do adult women narrate their reasons for joining a non-formal education?
2. What are the changes adult learners experienced due to their participation in non-formal education?

### **Rationale of the Study**

The female literacy rate of Nepal is 69.4 percent as per the National Population and Housing Census 2021. My working experience with women shows that social norms and values can be one of the reasons for the low literacy rate, since it undermines the importance of women's education. In a situation like this, it is challenging for women to decide to go back to school or enroll in school. Despite social restrictions and workload at home, women willingly participate in NFE. From this, I believe my research carries the rationales such as highlighting the importance of education in women's lives, the major reasons for getting enrolled in NFE, and it also reveals the changes they have experienced from the program that may be motivational lessons for other women. There have been wide-ranging research studies to explore informal learning and its distinction from formal learning, but there is a lack of research and clarity on the concept of non-formal learning (Johnson & Majewska, 2024). Thus, my study helps explore women's experience of lifelong learning through NFE.

In addition, NFE aims to address the limitations of formal education and promote lifelong learning, but it is perceived as a means to acquire the ability to read and write (National Campaign for Education [NCE] Nepal, 2021). NFE reaches all communities and provides competencies for the holistic development of individuals, but it is considered inferior to formal education (Almeida & Morias, 2024). Thus, connecting to Amartya Sen's capability approach, my study has explored the contribution of NFE in women's lives in enhancing their capability and functioning. As a result, the study establishes the significance of NFE in lifelong learning and states that learning is acquired anywhere and needs equal recognition.

### **Delimitation of the Study**

Lifelong learning integrates learning and living. It encompasses a wide range of learning activities and modalities (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning [UNESCO-ILL], 2022). For my study, I have specifically focused on NFE, and the participants are women learners who are continuing their education from one of the programs of NFE programs. They are the learners from the government-supported adult non-formal schools, which are commonly known as women's schools. It is functioning in a blended form that incorporates features of both formal and non-formal learning.

Government-supported NFE programs for adults are designed as long-term interventions, requiring learners to commit to a five-year program that progresses through defined levels of learning. Their commitment to a longer-term program reflects their strong motivation to join the school and their aspiration for transformation. Thus, my participants were selected based on their commitment and motivation for learning. Similarly, my study has looked over only changes in women concerning their capabilities to adapt to a changing world based on Amartya Sen's Capability Approach.

### **Chapter Summary**

At the beginning of the first chapter, I presented the story of the grandmother and mother, highlighting the societal structure of Nepal and its impact on women's access to education. Despite being interested in studying, they could not get into the school. Presenting the experiences of the women of my family, I connected them with the purpose of my study, the study's rationale, and the research questions. My study aimed to explore the stories of women joining NFE for lifelong learning and the changes they experienced after joining NFE.

### **Organization of the Study**

This thesis is divided into eight chapters. The first chapter introduces the key concept, statement of the problem, purposes of the study, research questions, rationale, and delimitation of the study. Similarly, the second chapter comprises the relevant literature and theoretical framework of the study. The research methodology is discussed in the third chapter, while the findings of the study are presented in the fourth, fifth, and sixth chapters of the study. The seventh chapter of this thesis presents a discussion of the study. Finally, the eighth chapter presents insights, conclusions, and implications of the study.



## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I reviewed literature about themes, theoretical concepts, policy, and empirical review on NFE and lifelong learning. This chapter explores the context of NFE in Nepal and its relation to lifelong learning. It also reviews NFE policy and the National Qualification Framework (NQF). Further, the empirical review comprises the findings of studies conducted at the national level, presenting the impact of NFE. This chapter explains Amartya Sen's Capability Approach and presents the research gap concerning the research methodology, nature, and scope.

#### **Thematic Review**

This section reviews the concept of lifelong learning and non-formal education. Further, it presents the connection between lifelong learning and NFE, NFE in the context of Nepal, and the status of women's access to education.

#### **Lifelong Learning**

Lifelong learning (LLL) does not consist of a specific period of learning and implementation; it covers learning activities throughout life. It takes place in various learning spaces through diverse learning methods (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization Institute for Lifelong Learning [UNESCO-IIL], 2022). Formal learning targets to young age group, but non-formal learning breaks the restriction (Mahoney & Kiernan, 2024). It is open to individuals of any age group, background, and geographical area. It is inclusive learning. The significance of lifelong learning is increasing since modern life demands enhanced knowledge and skill (Regmi, 2018), and the core of lifelong learning is non-formal and informal learning (Regmi, 2020).

#### **Non-Formal Education**

Formal, informal, and non-formal are three categories of education. NFE is institutionalized, deliberate, and organized by educational institutions. Unlike formal education, NFE is a complementary, alternative, and/or addition to formal education as part of an individual's continuous learning process. It ensures everyone has the right to education (UNESCO, 2012).

In developing countries like Nepal, it is a challenge to access formal education, especially for girls and disadvantaged groups of people, because of its structure and existing social norms that limit girls from pursuing education. Highlighting the constraints of formal education, Regmi (2020) says that it is structured, rigid, costly, and requires cognitive skills. It does not even support people's attitudes to becoming active lifelong learners. In contrast, NFE provides access to education for those in remote areas and socially disadvantaged and marginalized groups. It provides learning experiences and resources closely related to their needs and circumstances (Latchem, 2018). NFE targets those populations who cannot get formal education and recognizes that the learners require a learning design that helps them achieve their full potential and understand that they learn differently.

Therefore, NFE can be an appropriate medium to bring those in education who are remote regarding geography and access to services and resources. In Nepal, the government, non-government agencies, and international development agencies have launched non-formal education programs in different parts of Nepal. These efforts are to acknowledge the importance of NFE in improving access to education and addressing gender, social, and geographical inequalities.

### **Context of NFE in Nepal**

Nepal started NFE in 1951 with programs to improve literacy as part of national development and to bring women and girls into the mainstream of education. Similarly, the National Education Commission and the National Non-Formal Education Council were formed to strengthen NFE in Nepal. During the 1980s, UNESCO and UNICEF introduced CLC through the Seti Education for Rural Development (SERD) project's adult literacy and development program (Regmi, 2020).

In 1990, at the governmental level, the National Education Commission was formed in Nepal to strengthen the NFE sector, and subsequently, the Non-Formal Education Council was formed. The NFE center, as a secretariat of the NFE council, was established to plan and implement programs related to NFE. In the Fiscal Year (FY 2008-2009), the Nepal government launched the National Literacy Campaign (NLC) and allocated 3% of its total education budget to non-formal education. The campaign, led by NFEC, aimed to increase adult literacy to 75% by 2015. In the FY 2012-2013, NFEC continued a literacy campaign program titled Literate Nepal Mission with the approach of 'each one teaches one'. This three-month program ran

classes for six days a month with two hours a day, covering a minimum of 150 hours of sessions (UNESCO, 2017).

Under the center's action plan, the CLC program was envisioned to develop and extend NFE (Bhandari, 2019) and a powerful agency for delivering non-formal education during the National Literacy Campaign and Literate Nepal Mission at the local level. With the emergence of the lifelong learning paradigm, NFE has gained importance in Nepal. As the four pillars of education, it is meant to develop the capability to know new and emerging knowledge, be able to perform technological work, adapt to a diverse environment, and be independent and innovative. In this sense, NFE is a mode of education for the present context that provides lifelong learning opportunities.

The research study by Devkota et al. (2020) briefly overviews the discrimination in Nepal's educational opportunities. According to his research, the school dropout rates between privileged and Dalit groups and privileged and indigenous groups have significant differences, with the latter group's inequalities being approximately 1.5 times bigger than the former. These findings recommend a policy that raises awareness of the value of education to lower the high rate of dropout among Indigenous and Dalit populations, in particular.

Acharya (2021) claims that out-of-school children (OOSC) are a global educational problem that contradicts the provision of Nepal's constitution, which guarantees free and compulsory education as a fundamental right. The study found that the out-of-school (OOS) phenomenon was more common among economically disadvantaged groups. In addition, he proposed the concept of the "educational ceiling," which is one of the key factors in the issue of school dropouts. The educational ceiling is the lowest level of formal education considered necessary and important for the lives and livelihoods of children and their parents.

These two studies highlight that Nepal still has challenges in achieving the goal of making education for all, despite different educational reforms and programs targeting the disadvantaged and hard-to-reach population. The dropouts and the degrading condition of education give us a deep realization that there is a lot of room for improvement in the quality of education, and to increase every individual's access to education. We are not satisfied with the progress in the education sector. However, we cannot ignore the changes observed in the country's education policy and

programs targeted at improving the country's education status and bringing it into the mainstream of education.

Since non-formal education is flexible and diverse (Almeida & Morais, 2024), it reaches the disadvantaged community who cannot get into formal education. Nepal has tried to develop non-formal education, though it cannot institutionalize lifelong learning. Currently, the literacy rate of the population above five years is 76.2 percent, and the literacy rate between 15 to 60 years is 85 percent. Similarly, 2,151 active CLECs are running activities of lifelong learning, 171 are schools for adults, 64 districts are declared literate, and 121 schools are running open schools (Center for Education and Human Resource Development [CEHRD], 2023).

### **Structure of NFE in Nepal:**

According to the implementation facilitation guidelines for the Non-formal Education and Lifelong Learning program 2080, non-formal education and lifelong learning are structured into literacy programs, alternative educational programs, non-formal and open education, and lifelong learning.

**Literacy Program:** Local government organizes literacy programs for illiterate residents, mobilizing CLEC, local schools, development organizations, civil society, media, and parents.

**Alternative Educational Program:** The program for individuals away from formal education or dropouts who attend alternative education for basic education. There are three levels of education, i.e., Level 1 (1-3) and Level 2 (class 4-5), complete in one year, while Level 3 (class 6-8) requires 2 years for completion.

**Non-Formal and Open Education Program:** This targets adults without secondary-level education. This program takes 2 years to complete Level 4 (class 9-10) and Level 5 (class 11-12).

**Lifelong learning:** This program is for adults above 15 who cannot get into basic and secondary education. Based on the national non-formal education curriculum, education programs will be from level 1 to level 5.

### **Non-Formal Education and Lifelong Learning for Women in Nepal**

The study of Rana (2012) recommends an education system that considers age, location, and the need for flexible class times, and non-formal education considers this condition. NFE is particularly important for adolescent girls who often do not fit into the formal education structure due to being over-aged for their grade level and the challenges of attending a full school day. Secondary and post-secondary

education can equip these girls with the knowledge and skills needed to make informed life choices, preventing early marriage, early pregnancy, and other negative health outcomes related to human trafficking.

The study in the context of Nepal by LeVine et al. (2004) suggests that women's education, even in poor-quality schools, can provide women with credentials for higher status, liberation from traditional family constraints, and modern ideas and attitudes. Moreover, behavior change communication tends to be more effective among more educated women, possibly due to their better understanding of these messages and their influence on the household. Despite significant progress in increasing the net enrollment of girls in primary school, many adolescent girls from disadvantaged and marginalized groups in rural areas struggle to transition successfully from primary to post-primary education. The dropout is often due to the high cost of secondary education and societal gender discrimination. In Nepal, one of the poorest countries in South Asia, investing in girls' secondary education is the smartest choice due to its substantial potential economic and social benefits (Rana, 2012).

In today's rapidly changing world, lifelong learning opportunities are essential for individual fulfillment, social cohesion, and economic prosperity. Education should no longer be confined to a single period of one's life. Everyone, especially the most marginalized and disadvantaged, must have access to lifelong learning opportunities for employment and personal agency. To address our interconnected global challenges, we must ensure the right to lifelong learning, providing all individuals, regardless of age or context, with the knowledge and skills necessary to realize their full potential and live with dignity (Chaturvedi, 2023). The study of Almeida and Morais (2024) claims that non-formal education is a strategy to learn new skills and an educational process to implement lifelong learning. It is more important for those who belong to underprivileged communities since it provides them with learning opportunities and gives them access to lifelong learning. With a similar objective, Nepal has alternative and non-formal education programs that provide opportunities for learning for those who have difficulty in pursuing formal education.

### **Non-formal Education and Development**

The individuals learn life skills through non-formal education that builds their capacity to deal with different life situations and enables them to participate in their professional, social, and personal lives (Singh, 2015). The World Conference on

Education for All, held in Justine, Thailand, in 1990, centered its agenda on developing education, and Nepal was a participating member of the conference. However, according to the Education for All (EFA) Assessment Report 2000, Nepal lagged in achieving the EFA goal. In the World Education Forum on EFA of 2000, Nepal adopted the Dakar Framework for Action (DFA) for Education for All: Meeting Our Collective Commitments (UNESCO, 2015).

The DFA framework recognized non-formal education as an alternative pathway to learning and a means to achieve EFA's objectives (Hoppers, 2008). As part of this initiative, the EFA program was incorporated into the Millennium Development Goal through the National Plan of Action, with adult literacy as one of the focus areas (International Alert, 2006). Further building on these commitments, the World Education Forum 2015 adopted the Incheon Declaration for Education 2030, highlighting the importance of recognition, validation, and accreditation of the knowledge, skills, and competencies gained from non-formal and informal education (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology [MoEST], n. d). Nepal strengthened NFE by implementing the SDGs and integrating NFE into the national and School Sector Development Plan (SSDP). Despite these efforts and the impacts of NFE, the 2016/2017 status report states that the CLCs are not well equipped and lack technical skills. Similarly, collaboration among municipalities and concerned agencies in promoting NFE is not satisfactory. The Poteet's study (2022) highlights the role of NFE in overcoming the barriers to girls' education in South Asian countries, particularly Afghanistan, Bhutan, India, and Nepal. The study shows that NFE's intervention is significant in creating educational opportunities for girls since it addresses challenges of school distance, social norms, and security concerns.

According to a report by Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (2003), today's world demands literacy, numeracy, and problem-solving skills. Individuals can pursue additional skills and knowledge only after these foundational skills are acquired. These capabilities open community engagement, networking, and lifelong learning opportunities. With increased productivity, the probability of employment also increases. On the other hand, the report depicts that illiteracy leads to disadvantages for people, including unemployment and poverty. The study with Nepali women examined the impact of non-formal education through a survey that compared the changes between participants and non-participants in the literacy program. After program participation, the participants showed more knowledge of the

political context and confidence in their political representation. Similarly, they were more informed of their rights and forms of violence against women. They had engaged in community development and groups (Stromquist, 2008). Thus, NFE contributes significantly to improving women's understanding of their rights and participation in the public sphere.

### **Policy Review**

The Constitution of Nepal 2015 recognizes education as a fundamental right of citizens and guarantees free and compulsory basic education and free secondary-level education. In line with Schedule 8 of Nepal's Constitution, the Local Government Operation Act 2017 allows local governments to formulate policy, law, plan, implement, monitor, and evaluate basic and secondary education, including NFE. Similarly, the 2018 Act about Compulsory and Free Education ensures everyone has the right to literacy or education through alternative, non-formal, and open education by translating constitutional provisions into practice.

The School Sector Development Program (SSDP, 2016–2023) incorporates Non-Formal Education (NFE) as part of basic education in its ongoing efforts to guarantee that everyone has equitable access to education. To implement the constitutional provisions and the Compulsory and Free Education Act, the government has the Compulsory and Free Education Rules 2020. The rules mandate the local government to run an alternative education program for those children who have missed schooling opportunities or dropped out their school. This program uses an alternative education curriculum based on the National Curriculum Framework. With the country's federal structure, Nepal had a new Education Policy in 2019 to establish linkages among formal, non-formal, and informal education and to ensure equivalency, mobility, and permeability based on the national qualification framework. This policy discusses the programs promoting lifelong learning and bringing NFE into the national education system, making it equivalent to formal education and a fully literate country.

National Education Policy 2019 replaces the NFE policy and gives local governments the right to manage school education and other non-formal education, formulate specific laws, plans, and programs, and implement, monitor, and evaluate education programs. Article 10.26 of the Education Policy focuses on enhancing non-formal, lifelong, traditional, and open education by developing and integrating community libraries and learning centers. Similarly, Article 10.27 emphasizes the role

of lifelong programs in achieving national education goals and the integration of all forms of learning into a formal national education framework.

The challenge for now is that only a few local governments have formulated their education policy, and physical infrastructure and roads are their higher and lower priorities in education in almost every local government (National Campaign for Education Nepal [NCE], 2021). Thus, NFE has more challenges in operation since it lacks a policy impacting budget allocation and ownership of the local government. Non-formal and alternative education provisions remain vague even in municipalities with education policies. The policies broadly state that municipalities will make arrangements for such programs. Still, they don't have clarity on how to promote lifelong learning and adult education, and lack details on their operation method, resources, and facilitators. For instance, the policies state that the municipality education committee monitors CLC, and SMC oversees alternative education. However, these responsibilities are ambiguously defined, with less guidance on the process and capacity-building efforts to execute them at the local level (NCE, 2020)

Formal education alone cannot fulfill Nepal's commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which aim to ensure 17 goals, including goal 4 on quality education (Rogers, 2019). Goal 4 is all about inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning. Aligning with Nepal's international commitments to the SDG and the Incheon Declaration of the World Education Forum, the School Sector Development Plan (SSDP) 2016-2023 aims to strengthen NFE and lifelong learning (Government of Nepal, 2017). Thus, Nepal has made efforts to make international commitments in practice through its plan. It also includes a plan for the standardization of NFE curricula and accreditation/equivalence of NFE programs by the Ministry of Education (MOE). On the foundation of SSDP, the School Education Sector Plan (2022/2023-2031/2032) has been developed, and one of the objectives is to strengthen alternative means of education and their linkage to formal education (MoEST, 2022).

Nepal's 15th Five-Year Plan (2076/077-2080/081) has strategies to connect learning and skills acquired by non-formal and alternative education with income-generating programs to ensure lifelong learning. The 16th Five-Year Plan emphasizes formulating policies, laws, and guidelines for improving the education system and providing access to education in remote communities through open and non-formal education. Further, it centers on the effectiveness of national qualification assessment,



recognition of prior learning, and promotion of non-formal education and lifelong learning (National Planning Commission [NPC], 2023)

Similarly, education is the center of the agenda of SDG 2030, which aims to ensure inclusive and quality education and promote lifelong learning. Not limited to SDG 4, the educational goal is linked across SDGs. Since EFA's commitment to providing the right to basic education for all could not be achieved by 2015, SDG 4 supports this unaccomplished target. It aims to ensure equal learning opportunities for youth and adults through lifelong learning. Further, SDG 4 implies the lifelong learning approach's validation, recognition, and accreditation (UNESCO, n. d.)

The Local Governance Operation Act 2017 defines the role and responsibility of local government. It provides the authority to local government to formulate, implement, monitor, evaluate, and regulate policies and programs regarding basic education and NFE. However, these changes cannot be adopted as anticipated, and the local government is having difficulty fulfilling this duty successfully. Local governments lack the human resources and budget to develop education policies, programs, and initiatives (Neupane, 2020). NFE is not recognized as significant, as only 1% of the total education budget goes to NFE and lifelong learning (NCE, 2021). The government approved the National Qualification Framework (NQF) in 2020, and the framework is awaiting legal and institutional arrangements before its implementation (CEHRD, 2023). Implementing the framework will provide an opportunity for the certification of learning achieved from any mode by testing the level-wise competency of learners and making them eligible to enter either formal or non-formal education systems. Based on NQF, the Non-Formal Education National Curriculum was developed and approved by the National Curriculum Development and Assessment Council on May 4, 2023 (CEHRD, 2023). The establishment of NQF provides equivalencies between skills acquired by formal, non-formal, and informal learning and recognizes literacy as a foundation of lifelong learning (UNESCO-ILL, 2013)

### **National Qualification Framework (NQF)**

N. Dhakal, Director of the CEHRD shared that individuals who are above the age of 15 and away from formal education for different reasons should be provided education in a flexible mode, and that mode is non-formal. Non-formal education allows individuals to acquire knowledge and skills without attending school.

According to him, NQF certifies their learning based on their competency level regardless of their learning mode (personal communication, May 27, 2024).

The reasons for developing and implementing NQF are promoting lifelong learning and quality assurance, and recognition. People gain their understanding, experiences, and learning in particular areas through work or learning via formal, non-formal, and informal (CTVET/NSTB & Swisscontact, 2019). According to N. Dhakal, these experiences and learning help them build their capability to perform particular tasks. NQF recognizes the skills that individuals have already gained through an assessment system called Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). This provision will be helpful to those who have skills and knowledge from work experiences or self-learning (personal communication, May 27, 2024). The study of Bhandari (2024) presents the importance of RPL in Nepal for promoting dignified employment and helps in mobilizing skills and knowledge of migrant returnees/

S. Acharya, an NFE expert, shared her experience reviewing the new NFE curriculum. NFE expert opined to have an NQF mechanism that allows for assessing the learning of all types of learners. According to her, some adults learn without intending to acquire certificates for higher degrees and employment. In addition, some adults want to study the school curriculum as they perceive that it makes them eligible for the same certificate as students receive from formal education. Thus, NQF has to consider the needs of all learners, and it's a challenge. Similarly, the ownership of local government is a must for its implementation (personal communication, February 12, 2025).

### **Empirical Review**

The study by Regmi (2009) establishes NFE as a key strategy for lifelong learning. This study is a two-phase sequential method of phenomenology and survey. It shows that non-formal learners are equally employable as formal learners if a conducive environment is provided to enhance their knowledge, skills, and competencies. Similarly, the study by Bhandari (2019) explores the effectiveness of NFE in Nepal based on literacy, the Human Development Index (HDI), and the number of participants in the program. The study used secondary data from the budget speech of the government, reports of NFEC, and flash reports of the government, and its findings were positive regarding the impact of NFE on these factors.

The study of Sharma (2014) investigates the three modes of learning- formal, non-formal, and informal- using case studies and secondary sources. It is evident from

the study that the integration of three modes of learning is needed to create empowered and self-reliant communities. Each mode of learning has a significant role in making changes in the community, and they complement each other for lifelong learning, as shown in Rogers's study (2019). The study has emphasized the revival of NFE and its importance in achieving the SDGs. Different from other studies, the study of Karki and Mix (2018) attempts to identify the types of social capital that influence women's decisions to join school. The study used a qualitative approach and explored the fact that the nuclear family and support from family members and friends are essential factors in making women join the school.

Supporting the discourse, Khan (2013) emphasizes the significance of NFE in promoting women's empowerment with the instance of women from a literacy class who gained the confidence to prioritize attending the classes, even in the face of criticism from their families and communities, and leaving their household chores unfinished. The study further claims that continuous engagement in NFE makes women capable of making decisions and speaking up for themselves. Referring to these studies and national reports, my study aimed to explore reasons for women to join NFE and the changes they have gained after pursuing education, which helps establish the importance of NFE in lifelong learning and enhancing women's capabilities.

The existing studies present the contribution of NFE to community empowerment and its effectiveness in disseminating education to people derived from formal education. It has also helped to instill confidence in the learner to access information and skills to deal with the challenges of personal life. However, non-formal and informal learning lack accreditation and recognition as formal learning, which has resulted in less effort in their promotion and improvement in the quality and priorities of the government.

### **Theoretical Referent**

This study explores women's lifelong learning experiences participating in NFE programs, focusing on those deprived of formal education due to various factors such as poverty, gender inequality, remoteness, and social norms. These women, lacking access to learning opportunities, have been unable to fully exercise their rights and lead lives of their own choice. Their enrollment in NFE aims to enable them to develop their capabilities and achieve a higher level of functioning. Therefore, I find

that Amartya Sen's capability approach is the most suitable theory for understanding the status of women in Nepal and their progress after engaging in NFE.

Capability and human functioning are core ideas of the capability approach, where capability is an opportunity to achieve a valuable combination of human functioning. In contrast, human functioning refers to what a person can do or be. According to Sen (2005), capability and functioning are crucial in understanding the opportunity aspects of freedom and human rights. The capability approach helps explain differences in opportunity in individuals even when they have the same means. Relating to my study, there are differences in opportunities between literate and non-literate women, even if they have the same set of resources. Thus, they were willing to attend NFE to enhance their capabilities and functioning,

Walker (2005) defines the capability approach as centered on freedom and creating an environment conducive to human development. According to his perspective, capability refers to an individual's ability to be and to do certain things. It recognizes that not all individuals have equal access to education. Even when they do, the resources provided by education may not lead to similar advantages in life for everyone (Hart, 2012). Moreover, Saito's (2003) research highlights the crucial and interactive relationship between the capability approach and education.

Applying the capability approach to this study allows for examining how NFE programs empower women excluded from formal education. These programs provide women with the necessary skills and knowledge to enhance their capabilities, enabling them to live lives aligned with their aspirations. This approach encompasses Sen's understanding of human development as improving our lives and freedoms. According to Sen, human development involves removing major obstacles that impede our freedom (Kuhumba, 2018). In the context of my study, the major obstacles hindering women from accessing education include poverty, gender and social norms, geographical remoteness, and the rigidity of the formal education system, among others. By employing Amartya Sen's capability approach, I have contextualized the barriers women face in accessing education, leading to their illiteracy. However, with the introduction of NFE, these hindrances were minimized as it provided an affordable, accessible, and flexible alternative that targets those deprived of education. In this situation, women could pursue education, which means they are now confident, able to access information quickly, travel independently, and

have improved public speaking skills and leadership that have affected their overall functioning.

According to the capability approach, illiteracy leads to capability deprivation, while the ‘ability to read and write’ as a capability is a condition of well-being (Maddox, 2008). This approach helps understand the role of NFE in enhancing women’s functioning, what they can do and be, and their future capabilities. It also links their literacy skills to their freedom to choose and lead a dignified life they value.

### **Research Gap**

During my literature review, I discovered that most of the research studies in Nepal on Non-formal education were done a decade ago. While these studies provide suitable insight into the situation of NFE, their relevance in the present context is questionable due to numerous changes and reforms that have occurred since then. It is important to critically examine the applicability of previous studies to the current scenario.

Furthermore, I observed that most of the research on NFE primarily focuses on CLC and its functions in rural transformation, poverty reduction, and community changes. One notable study on adult school was conducted by Karl and Mix and explored the social factors contributing to women's enrollment in school. However, there is a significant gap in the research for in-depth studies in adult schools focused on the reasons for adult women to join the school. My study provides an opportunity for my research to contribute new knowledge by examining women's experiences at an individual level within the context of NFE and lifelong learning.

Moreover, my study diverges from previous research by concentrating on the issues faced by urban and migrant women. This focus on urban and migrant women is crucial as it has the potential to generate new insights and contribute to the existing body of knowledge of NFE and lifelong learning. By exploring these women's unique challenges and experiences, my research aims to shed light on their needs and aspirations.

In summary, the existing research on NFE is primarily outdated, and there is a limited understanding of adult schools compared to CLC. Previous studies have primarily emphasized the role of NFE in rural transformation, poverty reduction, and community changes. However, they overlooked the in-depth exploration of the reasons and needs of women joining NFE at an adult age. Through my research, I aim

to fill this gap by focusing on the experiences of urban migrant women, thereby contributing new knowledge to the field of NFE and its role in lifelong learning. My research covers the background of the participants, their reasons for participating in NFE, and the changes they have acquired after participating in NFE. Therefore, this research presents the whole story of a woman and her journey in lifelong learning.

### **Chapter Summary**

In the chapter literature review, I have included literature on non-formal education, its connection with Nepal, and lifelong learning. According to the literature, NFE encompasses learners who are away from access to access, and programs are designed based on the needs of learners to enhance their capabilities and functioning. Similarly, this chapter included a policy review focusing on NFE and studies on the impact of NFE. Further, the theoretical referent section deals with Amartya Sen's capability approach and its applicability in the study.

## CHAPTER III

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines my study's research methodology, which covers the study's philosophy, participant selection procedure, information collection method, and study quality. Similarly, this chapter includes data analysis, interpretation tools, and ethical considerations.

#### **Philosophical Orientation of the Study**

My study follows the social constructivism paradigm, which deals with ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions. Regarding understanding the paradigm, Wahyuni (2012) explains ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology to build an understanding of the paradigm. It is said that ontology and epistemology are two main philosophical dimensions that guide the selection of the paradigm for our study. Ontology relates to the nature of knowledge, and epistemology is a source of knowledge. Similarly, axiology is concerned with the research values in the study, while my methodology deals with the research process.

#### **Ontological Assumptions**

The ontology relates to the nature of reality and its characteristics. The ontological assumption of narrative inquiry is that reality is multiple, constructed through the stories people tell about their lives. According to Clandinin (2022), narrative inquiry is based on the understanding that individuals create meaning through their experiences. In the narrative inquiry, the researcher is a co-participant in co-constructing the knowledge with the research participant in the study (Lindsay & Schwind, 2016). In addition, the narrative inquirer believes that the social and cultural context influences participants' narratives, and knowledge is generated through interaction with the context.

Thus, being an interpretative researcher, the concept of multiple realities is my ontological position. Since I assume the nature of reality is contextual and subjective, I bring the stories of women showing their different contexts, perceptions, and realities here (Creswell, 2013). My study presented multiple perspectives of adult learners in response to their reasons for being at school at their adult age and the changes they have acquired after attending school. As evidence of the multiple

realities, I have included quotes based on the actual statements of different individuals and the presentation of different points of view, varied by individuals.

### **Assumption of Epistemology**

The epistemology of the study deals with questions such as how a researcher generates knowledge, what counts as knowledge, how to justify the knowledge claims, and the relationship between the researcher and the participants (Creswell, 2013). It is about how knowledge is created and how to know it. My study is grounded on constructivist epistemology, which acknowledges that knowledge is dependent and can be generated through the interaction of people within the socio-cultural context they live. Similarly, my epistemological assumption is that subjective knowledge could be generated through in-depth interactions between the researcher and participants (Moran & Smircich, 1980). To enrich this understanding, I conducted my research in the participants' schools, allowing me to observe their activities and interactions with their peers and teachers. Additionally, I have acknowledged my positionality and personal experiences in co-constructing an understanding of the participants' stories.

According to Harreveld et al. (2016), "*Epistemology is the theory of knowledge and a researcher with a clear epistemology can select an appropriate theoretical perspective and methodology*" (pp. 47-48). Guided by this principle, I have used narrative inquiry as my research methodology. This approach has enabled me to focus on participants' narratives to understand their stories and make interpretations about their cultural, social, and personal context.

### **Assumption of Axiology**

Axiology deals with the roles of the researcher and participants' values in the study. My axiological stance is to value my research participants' views and values, which are influenced by their unique contexts and backgrounds. I have acknowledged the value-laden nature of the study and communicated my values throughout the study. As a researcher, I have explored and reflected on my values and beliefs alongside those of the participants. The study clearly articulates my belief that NFE positively impacts women's lives, fostering lifelong learning and personal growth. By acknowledging this stance, I recognize that my values impact how I interpret participants' narratives and meaning construction from their experiences. To maintain the authenticity and ethics of my study, I have positioned myself as a co-constructor



of knowledge (Creswell, 2007), incorporating my interpretations in conjunction with the interpretations of participants.

### **Research Paradigm**

In this study, I used a social constructivism paradigm. As a constructivist, I believe multiple realities are constructed through discussions or interactions with other persons. In this paradigm, the meaning and understanding are constructed with the active involvement of the researcher (Kim, 2014). Social constructivists make meaning of human experience, understanding social, cultural, and historical background. According to Creswell (2007), social constructivists believe that people look for explanations of the environments in which they live and work. They create subjective interpretations of their experiences following their understanding. Thus, the meanings differ from one individual to another, and they are multiple. The study depends on participants' views of the situation under study. Following the constructivism paradigm, my study was built on multiple realities since I believed that individuals interpret reality based on their knowledge, beliefs, and experiences. I interviewed my participants with broad, open-ended questions that helped them construct the meaning of the situation. As a researcher, I listened to their stories carefully and in detail. One of the objectives of my study was to explore women's reasons for joining NFE, so my focus was also to understand their context regarding social structure and their background.

### **Research Design**

I adopted a narrative inquiry to present the participants' experiences chronologically. I consider human beings a storytelling organism (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990) who lead storied lives in individual and social life. Similarly, I consider narratives or stories to help understand participants' experiences, establish connections to time, environment, and culture, and help the researcher understand events in their lives (Haydon & Van Der Riet, 2017). The study of narrative is the study of how humans experience the world. The main goal of narrative inquiry is to comprehend participant experiences. Thus, it enables the close examination of people's experiences over time and context by acting as both a view on the phenomenon of people's experiences and a methodology for narratively inquiring into experience (Clandinin & Caine, 2008). Reality is subjective for me; it changes with the context, and participants create the reality based on their understanding. The researcher collaborates with the participants in the narrative inquiry to understand and

inquire into the experience (Clandinin, 2022). I inquired about the participants about the changes over time, places, and social interaction, making narrative inquiry different from other methodologies.

I found the deep narration very challenging during data collection since the information was not received in a single meeting with the participant. I had to develop a good relationship with the participants to bring out the stories (Adhikari, 2021). For the narrative inquirer, the empirical data are central to the study. I collaborated with my participants on the data collection, which was collected in the form of field notes, interview transcripts, and observations (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). I visited my participants in their schools after confirming their time for the interview. With the help of the school's principal, I first met them informally to explore their interest in participating in the study, and I had a series of interviews with the participants afterward.

### **Study Area**

For the study, I purposefully chose schools within Kathmandu Valley as the study area. These schools are supported by the Nepal government and run NFE for adult women up to level 5. The learners of these schools are mainly migrants, wage laborers, and homemakers.

### **Participant Selection**

I used purposive sampling to select the participants for my study. The participants with rich information on the research question and a better understanding of the phenomena to be studied were selected to participate in my study (Sargeant, 2012). Though the participant selection was purposeful, criteria were set, such as participants with rich information, time, and ease of access for frequent interviews. The study participants are women who are learners in non-formal adult schools. I chose migrant urban women as they have experienced complex challenges in living in a new urban setting. At first, I contacted the school principals and told them in detail about my research and its objectives. Based on my research's purpose and the criteria set for the participants, the principals helped me to reach out to the participants.

According to Sargeant (2012), the number of participants depends on how many would be needed to gather all the necessary information about the phenomenon under study. The sample size is sufficient when additional interviews don't result in new information, an endpoint called data saturation. The total number of participants in my study is five. They are adult learners who had migrated to urban areas after

their marriage at a young age. They have stories of hardship while dealing with their married and urban life. I have used pseudonyms for the participants as Sunita, Sabina, Pasang, Radha, and Anita. Chapter IV is dedicated to my participants' backgrounds and stories in detail, so I have only briefly introduced them in this chapter.

### **Sunita**

44-year-old Sunita is living with her husband and two children. She is a learner of level 2 at the non-formal adult school in Chabahil. She runs a tailoring center at Bansbari and is interested in reading and writing. She aims to help deprived and elderly people through community service and support.

### **Sabina**

37-year-old Sabina is a single mother of two children and a homemaker searching for a job opportunity. She is a learner of level 2 at a non-formal adult school in Chabahil. She wants to pursue higher education to be independent and run her own business.

### **Pasang**

53-year-old Pasang is a migrant returnee from Israel with years of working experience as a caregiver to terminally ill patients. She is a learner of level 1 at a non-formal adult school in Chabahil. She is keen on learning and wants to pursue nursing as her career.

### **Radha**

52-year-old Radha is a loving grandmother and president of the Inter Party Women's Network (IPWN). She is a learner of level 3 at a non-formal adult school in Lagankhel. She aims to be a competent political actor and work for women's empowerment.

### **Anita**

60-year-old Anita is a homemaker living with her family in Shantinagar. She is a learner of level 1 at a non-formal adult school in Chabahil. She started her life in Kathmandu as a street vendor and dedicated her life to raising her children. She is now at school to utilize her time, learn, and develop her skills and knowledge.

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>level</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Origin</b>
Sunita	44	Level 2	Janajati	Kathmandu
Sabina	37	Level 2	Janajati	Dolakha
Pasang	53	Level 1	Janajati	Solukhumbu
Radha	52	Level 3	Brahmin	Ramechhap
Anita	60	Level 1	Dalit	Okhaldunga

### **Approaches to Information Collection**

The study used in-depth interviews with the participants to collect information regarding their experiences of non-formal education. According to Barrett and Twycross (2018), interviews are the most direct and easy way to obtain rich, in-depth information about a particular phenomenon. The type of interviews used to gather information is determined by research questions, participant characteristics, and the researcher's preferred method. I conducted face-to-face, in-depth interviews for this study using interview guidelines. Similarly, narrative stories were also collected through observation, documents, pictures, and other qualitative data sources. With the interview guideline, I interacted with participants to collect their experiences of the past, present, and future, which were arranged chronologically (Creswell, 2013).

As a researcher, I understand that listening to my participants' stories is the foremost step in information collection. This process provided my participants time and space for their stories, providing authority and validity to the information. As Connelly and Clandinin (1990) suggested, I applied the following tools in the information collection.

#### **Field Notes**

Using a primary tool of narrative inquiry, I prepared field notes by observing my participants' class engagement, interaction with friends, and participation in school events. Further, I used my field notes to develop my participants' stories.

#### **Interviews**

Another tool I used in data collection was the unstructured interview. I interviewed my participants and recorded the conversation with their consent. Later, I made transcripts from the interview recording and field notes. Similarly, I interviewed the principals and teachers of the participants' schools to understand Nepal's NFE,

curriculum, and educational system. In addition, I had an interview with the then-director of CEHRD to understand the situation of NFE in Nepal, NQF, and Nepal's efforts in implementing NFE. I also interviewed an NFE expert to better understand NFE and its application in terms of the relevancy and needs of adult learners.

### **Observation**

I have applied observation as a tool for data collection in my study. Observation is a method of collecting data where the researcher purposefully participates in the event, views the phenomenon, and listens to the interaction (McKechnie, 2008). I participated in the class of adult learners and observed how they learn in the class, and how they interact with the teachers and friends while learning. Similarly, I attended the annual function of the school of Chabahil. The principal and teachers delivered their speeches and presented the work of the school, focused on lifelong learning. The performances of learners highlighted information on the importance of lifelong learning and the changes they have experienced after participating in NFE.

### **Other Narrative Data Sources**

To learn more about adult learners and approaches to school, I referred to the annual newsletter and publication of related schools and read about their experiences of being learners.

### **Data Analysis/Meaning Making and Interpretation**

The study collected unstructured text-based data from field notes, interview transcripts, and observation notes. Thus, data analysis is necessary for research as a process of methodologically looking through and organizing interview transcripts, observation notes, or artifacts that help develop an understanding of the phenomenon. Analysis and interpretation of information are important for drawing the study results.

Butina (2015) states that data analysis is “the process of making sense out of the data” and follows a narrative thematic analysis process. As described by Butina (2015), I used a five-stage approach for data analysis: (a) data organization and preparation, which begins with transcription of recordings; (b) acquiring a general sense of the information (c) coding process; (d) categories or themes; and (e) interpretation of the data.

I organized the data by transcribing recordings of interviews where I removed informal conversations and assigned pseudonyms to the participants. I read and reread data to make sense of it (Liamputtong, 2009). I coded the data, and coding can be

understood as tags or labels provided to identify themes or topics from the data collected in the study (Wong, 2008). Before coding, I also practiced pre-coding by highlighting and underlining the quotes that grabbed my attention from where the codes could be generated (Liamputtong, 2009).

Coding involves condensing a huge amount of raw information or data, and this tagged or labeled data is forwarded for categorizing. The coding occurs in a cycle and a transitional process between data collection and analysis. As suggested by Saldana (2021), in the first coding cycle, I assigned concise, symbolic codes to data segments. In the second coding cycle, I refined codes and grouped them into categories, identifying overarching themes. Later, codes were synthesized into larger themes that carried the meaning of the data and linked to my research question. In this way, I applied multiple coding cycles to manage and filter data to generate categories and themes (Saldana, 2021). In the end, I created the meaning of the data by connecting each theme with a theory used in the study.

### **Quality Standards**

The study had set the criteria to maintain its quality. This study ensured the adoption of an appropriate research paradigm concerning the research topic, appropriate research methodology, theory, data collection method, and data interpretation. Qualitative research places a greater emphasis on uniqueness and context to develop credible knowledge about interpretations. Specifically, I considered three common places of narrative inquiry: temporality, sociality, and place. These common places were explored simultaneously while conducting a study using a narrative inquiry. According to Clandinin and Huber (2010), the common places of narrative inquiry are temporality, sociality, and place, which are described below in detail.

#### **Temporality**

In narrative inquiry, exploring the past, present, and future of people, places, things, and events being studied is essential. This approach recognizes that changes occur over time; therefore, it is important to assess the temporality of the researcher's and the participants' lives, places, things, and events (Clandinin and Huber, 2010). This method is fundamental to understanding people, places, and events as dynamic and constantly changing (Clandinin, 2007). In my study, I inquired about the past, present, and future of the women who are learning in adult school to explore how their learning journey has evolved and how they will continue to develop over time.

Referring to Elbow's concept of the "believing game", Connelly and Clandinin (1990) emphasize the importance of connected knowing, in which the researcher actively listens with the intent to understand the participant's story. In line with this approach, I listened closely to my participants' stories, which allowed me to engage deeply with their narratives as they unfolded. My prolonged engagement helped me ensure that information discrepancies were minimized. Furthermore, I collaborated with the participants through mutual storytelling and restorying as suggested by Connelly and Clandinin (1990), which deepened my understanding and helped maintain the information's consistency and validity throughout the study.

### **Sociality**

The narrative inquirer needs to attend to the participants' personal and social conditions of the participants as they play a vital role in shaping the stories and experiences. Personal conditions refer to the feelings and emotions of the inquirer and participants, whereas social conditions are considered cultural, social, instructional, and linguistic narratives (Clandinin, 2007). In addition, Connelly and Clandinin (2006) further mention the relationship between participants and researchers as a key aspect of sociality. They emphasize that researchers are always connected to the lives of the participants they study and cannot separate themselves from this relationship. The researcher's condition, therefore, influences the study, and this interconnectedness should be acknowledged and explored.

In my study, I intended to explore participants' personal and social factors to understand their educational journey better. I used open-ended interviews to learn about their condition. I encouraged my participants to share their feelings, emotions, and reflections on key moments such as when they were deprived of education, faced being non-literate, and enrolled in school. For social context, I inquired about their family structure, cultural background, and the educational environment they were part of. This approach helped me capture the personal and social factors that challenged them in accessing education and, in another way, motivated them to attend school in their later life.

### **Place**

The concept of place refers to the area or place where a study or event takes place. It is considered commonplace since each event has a place of occurrence. That means that each story is linked with the experiences, and each experience is connected with particular places. It is very important to specify the place since it changes over

time, and so might the nature of the experience. That's why the researcher needs to consider the place's impact on the experiences being studied (Clandinin et al., 2006). With this understanding, I have inquired about where the event occurs to gain better insights into stories and experiences. For this, my study described the participants' behavior, experience, and context so that the behaviors and experiences become meaningful to the outsider.

### **Ethical Consideration**

As a researcher, I conducted the research following ethical considerations of confidentiality, informed consent, and reporting if there is a conflict of interest. Before reaching the participants, I interacted with the school's Principal and explained the study's purposes and the participants I sought. I also collected information about the school and its teaching modality for the adult learner in the interaction. The principal helped me connect with the learners for my interview. Checking the availability of each participant, I set the time of the interview.

My foremost role was to inform the participants about my study and its objective. I shared my identity with my participants before obtaining any information. I told them about every aspect of my research, including its purpose and rationale, and assured them that their data would be used only for research purposes. After having their agreement to participate in the research, I interviewed them. I built rapport and created a comfortable environment so they could share their experiences openly. I also ensured that their information would be kept confidential.

Similarly, the study has maintained the anonymity and confidentiality of participants (Clandinin & Huber, 2010). I used the pseudonyms of the participants so as not to disclose the identity of the research participants. Rather than throwing multiple questions, I was an active listener and listened to their stories without being judgmental. Similarly, the relational responsibilities were taken into the long term. I was attentive to the participants' lives right from the moment I started to interview the participants till writing research texts and was guided by relational aspects throughout the process (Clandinin & Huber, 2010). I understood that participants' stories are who they are and who they are becoming, so I ensured that the research text represented them respectfully. Foremost, I followed the ethical guidelines of my university at every step of the research process.



### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter dealt with the research methodology of my study, in which I applied social constructivism as my research paradigm. The ontological assumption of the study is that reality is multiple and constructed through the participants' stories. Epistemology assumes that knowledge is generated through the interaction of people, and my axiological stance is to value my participants' views and values and acknowledge my values. In addition, the chapter outlined the process of data collection, participant selection, study site, data analysis, and ethical considerations.

## CHAPTER-IV

### BEHIND THE SCENES: UNVEILING PARTICIPANTS' UNTOLD STORIES

This chapter presents my participants' socioeconomic and educational backgrounds, which I have documented during my interviews. I have given their background information in this chapter to set the picture of each participant's reasons for not being able to attend school at an early age. Setting their socio-economic background, this chapter establishes the connection to the other chapters of the study.

#### **A Story of Sunita: A Journey in Search of the Meaning of Life**

Every day, Sunita reaches school at 6:00 AM and dedicates three hours to her studies. She had been very interested in studying since childhood, but she could not get that opportunity. She was one of nine daughters in her family who grew up watching her brother attend school while her father denied her and her sisters the same opportunity. She was born and raised in Tokha but could not get to school even though her place was in the Kathmandu district. Her parents never went to school and were farmers. She thinks it might be a lack of awareness or social norms that did not allow them to study like their brothers.

She could remember her childhood days doing household chores, feeding cattle, and collecting fodder for them as a child. In the early 1980s, Kathmandu was gradually urbanizing, and people were migrating for better opportunities and education. These changes did not affect the daily life of Sunita and the other girls in her village. Society thought that daughters were for household work, not school. Education reforms took place in the country, but those efforts could not change society's perception of girls. For society, girls are an asset to others and must excel in cooking and household chores to get a better life partner. Sunita mentioned that her mother did not know how to read and write, and she had to suffer a lot to raise ten children.

Her family had land and had to work hard day and night, but they did not know how to convert their crops into cash. They could not think that they would earn more if their children got an education. They believed that only sons could earn money; thus, they had to send them to school, but not their daughters. Sunita was not happy with her father's opinion, but she did not dare to protest. She had no alternative but to accept. In 1991, when she was eleven years old, one of her neighbors

approached and informed her about an adult literacy class run by Tulsi Meher. The class was in the evening, far from her home; thus, she had to stay overnight. She could not help attending that class, and she did not dare to ask permission from her parents. Despite the risks, she sneaked out of her house in the evening after completing all work at home for the class. The next morning, as she reached home, her father raged. He pulled her hair, dragged and severely beat her.

Nevertheless, her determination to study knew no bounds. She lied to her mother to gain her father's approval. She told her mother she would be paid Rs 400 monthly for attending the class. Her mother convinced her father to allow her to continue her class. She completed her literacy class in six months. She secured the first position and was awarded certificates at a program organized at Patan. Stating the condition of her society, she described,

*We, girls, were not allowed to talk to boys. If we were found, people used to spread rumors. My father probably punished me to ensure we did not get on the wrong path. I felt very bad hearing his negative remarks and punishment for attending literacy class. During that time, I think I was just eleven years old, and the year might be 1999 or 2000. We did not have a system of noting down dates, and I did not even know how to write them down then.*

After completing literacy class, she continued to study at home. She wrote one page daily and read a book for a few hours in the evening. Later, she became interested in tailoring. She walked two hours with her cousin's sister to Jhor to attend a tailoring class. In 1995, she completed her tailoring class and started to stitch clothes at home. She used to do both household chores and tailoring at home. She was paid Rs. 50 for stitching a pair of kurtas. Her neighbor liked her work, and she earned many customers. She topped an examination at the tailoring center and was selected as a teacher responsible for training a group of women from her VDC. She provided training to the group for six months. Her salary was Rs. 1500 per month. She bought a jacket for her father and a sari for her mother from her salary. At that time, she built confidence and felt happy to show her father that her daughter was equally capable of earning like a son. She also understood that education is the foundation for anything. If she had not attended the literacy class, she would not have thought of joining the tailoring class because it required the ability to read, write, and calculate. Later, she worked in the garment factory, where she had two months of training and Rs.500 per month for lunch, but she saved that money. She passed the examination despite the

obstacle. One of her teachers had informed the factory's boss that she had failed, so she had to fight against the odds. She was then offered a job at a garment factory. Her monthly salary was 2,700. Her provident fund was allocated 200 from her salary and Rs. 200 from the office. She was doing well at her work and earnings, but it was not easy for a woman to leave the house for work. People used to make different remarks, and she experienced several societal troubles.

During Sunita's childhood, non-formal education initiatives were expanding in Nepal through adult education and functional adult literacy programs. A few programs include out-of-school, flexible schooling, women's literacy, and community learning centers (Chitrakar, 2007). Non-formal education became the Asia-Pacific region's agenda within the Asia-Pacific Program of Education for All (APPEAL) framework in the 1980s. In Nepal, the government, with support from various national and international organizations, implemented non-formal education programs. Sunita mentioned attending adult literacy classes organized by Tulsi Meher, which indicates that the nation was getting momentum in non-formal education after the restoration of democracy in Nepal in 1990.

Despite the government's efforts to bring women into education, women like Sunita were struggling to go to school. The story of Sunita helped us to understand how social structure and context are essential to consider while developing a plan and policy. The Socio-cultural exclusion model used by Dahal et al. (2021) in the study explains that factors like unequal labor division, son preference, male dominance in leadership roles, early marriage, and dowry system contributed to girls' dropout from school. This model also helps us understand why Sunita struggled to attend school and why attending adult literacy classes was difficult. Her story highlights how deeply rooted social and family structures can prevent girls from accessing education. Further, Sunita's decision to marry against her family's wishes gave another turn in her life. Her dreams of education were shattered when she eloped.

### **A Story of Sabina: A Learning Journey of a Child Bride from Life and Textbook**

A 14-year-old child bride, Sabina, had not figured out what married life would be. She married a man who was 16 years older than her. Marriage was not of her choice; she was married off by her uncle. The reason for her marriage was the economic hardship of her family. The troubles in the family began when her father lost his eyesight in an accident, and later, he passed away when she was only seven years old. Then, her mother worked day and night in wool making and Sabina used to

help her. Raising four children in Kathmandu was very difficult for a single mother. Quoting to mother's hardship, Sabina reflected,

*All of us were born in Kathmandu, but my father was from Dolakha, Jiri. I don't know the exact date my father moved here. Probably 2025, 2030 BS. I have heard that the land cost was Rs.45,000 at that time. My father's salary was Rs. 200 per month. My mother was pregnant for only a few months when my father died. Our mother raised us. She worked for a living. She used to walk from Dillibazar to Dallu to bring wool and sell it, making its balls. She did dishes and cooking at others' homes, which was Rs. 800 per month. I helped my mother at her work. From my earnings, we sent our younger siblings to school.*

It was not that her family did not send her to school. She went to school for a year but had to leave her education since they could not pay the nominal fees of Rs. 30 for the examination. Then, she started to do household work at other people's houses. She was only nine years old. Her elder sister and she helped their mother run the family. Then, she did not think of attending school as she knew that her mother could not afford her education. Whenever she saw her friends with a school bag, she wished for the same, but she had to share family responsibilities at that young age. She was very good at household chores, cleaning the house, and washing clothes, and people used to like her work. Her childhood was not like others. She worked hard and helped her mother instead of playing and studying. She wished to study, but her earnings were more important for her family to survive, so she accepted and worked for a living. Her life took another turn without notice when her uncle brought a man for marriage. She initially disagreed, but she had no choice but to marry him.

Sabina's story highlights the impact of economic hardship on educational opportunities. After losing her father, the family's breadwinner, Sabina was forced to take on responsibilities at a young age. She worked to support her family, but their earnings were insufficient to cover the cost of education for her and her sister. Despite her deep desire to attend school, Sabina had to compromise her desire for the daily struggle of survival. Her experience reveals that educational access is closely linked to a family's economic status. Her experience resembles the findings of the UNICEF (n. d.) study, suggesting that impoverished children are less likely to attend school. If they do, they tend to drop out sooner due to the overwhelming responsibilities caused

by family obligations and financial constraints. Sabina's story reflects how poverty limits children's ability to pursue education and shapes their future.

### **A Story of Pasang: A Journey of a Woman of Courage and Dreams**

Pasang's birth in 1971 met a period of significant educational reform in Nepal. The country was undergoing major changes, particularly in its education system, with the rise of the democratic system. By the time Pasang reached her school age, the country was in the midst of its fourth five-year plan (1975-1980), which aimed to improve primary education by focusing on literacy and numeracy skills. Despite these national initiatives, the reality in Pasang's village in Solukhumbu did not reflect the intended progress, particularly for girls.

Gender discrimination was deeply rooted in her community, overshadowing the government's educational goals. Despite the objectives in the national plans, girls in her village were not encouraged to attend school. She faced significant barriers to education at a young age. Losing her father at the age of two and her mother's remarriage increased her distance from accessing education.

Raised by her uncle, Pasang found herself in a place where education was a luxury. Her uncle, facing financial hardship, was unable to prioritize her schooling. Despite her desire for education, she did not express understanding uncle's situation. The existence of social norms considering men as rulers of the state and women as they served others at home, and personal circumstances, prevented Pasang and many other girls in her village from accessing education. She grew up like other girls in her village, performing household chores and farming. She could not get an education, and now, it was not acceptable for her to stay dependent. With courage, she left her village with her friends to earn money. She had sold her chicken and her pewa [livestock given by the family to the individual] for Rs. 12 to manage her expenses for her living.

In the 1990s, trekking was blooming in the country, and Pasang was among the many young people who had joined this fascinating and adventurous job. Potter was not her dream job; she wanted to be a guide and a leader with power and respect. However, she did not possess the ability to read and write, so she had to limit herself to being a follower and a potter. Even at 51, Pasang still remembers her ambition and feels terrible for being unable to achieve it. She repeatedly mentioned that society thought sons were for ruling the state and women were for serving at others' homes. She highlighted societal structure and norms as the reasons for not having women in

education. However, according to her, education is a must for girls, preparing them for different life phases. She was earning money, but she was not satisfied with her position.

On the other hand, she had to deal with misbehavior and teasing at work, but considered it a part of life. Pasang was as firm as a rock. She used to carry 30-35 kilograms and walk with the trekking group from Lukla to Namche Bazar, carrying the loads of the trekkers. Pasang was well known for the hardships of life, but she was not happy being a potter. Every time she wished that she had pursued education, she could have been in a leadership and respectful position, a position with power. Stressing the importance of education, she shared,

*At that time, the guide had respect. They led the group and carried the money for the whole trip. Only after the guide there were sherpas and cooks. I aspired to be a guide, but did not know how to read and write.*

According to her, a good guide should be able to share information in detail about the places, mountains, and historical and cultural aspects of any site of visit. It is only possible to acquire this capacity and quality after reading, writing, and understanding the information; otherwise, they cannot provide information. Not only was it the ability, but a higher degree was preferable. She felt embarrassed when she could not read her clients' maps and menus. She always thought that she could have done better in her career if she had known how to read and write, because it would have given her more confidence in dealing with her clients and colleagues.

While climbing up and down, she came to the notice of one man, who later proposed to her for marriage. She took a week to get to know him and agreed to marry him because he was unmarried and of the same caste. Another reason for the agreement was his commitment to take her to Kathmandu after marriage.

Across Nepal, women share similar stories of societal preferences for sons and a superior status to men. Pasang's description of men as 'rulers' and women as 'service providers to another family' reflects deep-rooted gender discrimination, which shapes the roles and positions of men and women in society. As highlighted by Manchana and Gannavarapu (2024), socio-cultural norms and expectations towards girls and boys played a critical role in shaping the attitudes and behaviors of the research participants. They internalized these societal expectations, focused on household work, and limited themselves to the care of their family. It was normal for them as they observed other women doing the same. This patriarchal mindset widened

the gender gap, depriving women of the opportunity to access and benefit from education. In the case of Pasang, she bravely challenged these boundaries by entering the male-dominated trekking industry. However, her journey was not easy. She experienced teasing and misbehavior. Valentine (1989), as cited by Hillman (2019), highlights how communal spaces of women are often ‘invaded by whistles, comments, or physical assaults from strange men,’ making women feel unsafe. Pasang had a similar experience of threats that could have limited her freedom and autonomy.

### **A Story of Radha: A Journey in Search of Identity and Recognition**

I contacted the principal of the Women's School, located in Lalitpur, and briefed her about my research. I informed her about the participants I was looking for in my study. On August 29, 2023, I met Radha. I introduced myself, and she provided me with information. The interview lasted 45 minutes. She seemed uncomfortable during the interview at the beginning, but gradually opened up to the conversation. I asked her permission for an audio recording, but she did not consent, so I just noted our discussion. During our conversation, she shared her multiple experiences at a time; therefore, it was difficult to understand her stories in series. We were discussing while her class was running. Consequently, I realized that her attention was on her class. Thus, I requested her time for the next interview. She happily agreed, and we exchanged numbers. After a week, I called her and confirmed the meeting at her shop, situated at Mahalaxmasthan. She waved at me from a distance at the stop. We greeted each other and started our conversation in her shop. That shop was run by her daughter-in-law.

Radha spent her childhood in the serene village of Ramechhap. Born into a modest family, she was the apple of her parents' eyes. She eagerly attended the local school, but her journey in school ended when she reached the fifth grade. In those days, education beyond the primary level for girls was like going against social norms. At the tender age of fourteen, her father decided to marry her off. The marriage decision was influenced by societal expectations and norms that dictated a girl's role. Education for girls was considered unnecessary as it would distract them from their primary duties as wives and mothers.

Radha's dreams of higher education faded as she transitioned from a carefree child to a young bride with responsibilities. She was confined to her new home, immersed in the duties of a wife, daughter-in-law, and later mother. She poured her



heart and soul into the care of her family and gradually sacrificed her aspirations. Years passed, and she became a mother of two sons and a daughter. Later, she welcomed daughters-in-law and grandchildren into her home. Despite her love for her family, Radha couldn't get rid of her longing for education, which she had been denied.

Radha's story highlights that she did not have autonomy in making life choices. From childhood through her marriage, she listened to her parents, accepting decisions made on her behalf. This experience resonates with the findings of Basnet (2022), illustrating how girls often lack the freedom, unlike boys, to choose their interests and career paths and shape their futures. They are not free to choose who they want to be and how they want to lead their lives. Ultimately, such limitations on freedom and mobility hinder their capability enrichment, personal growth, and overall development.

### **A Story of Anita: Journey of Experience and Learning**

Anita, originally from Bhojpur, resides with her family in Purano Baneshwor, Kathmandu. During her school years, girls were expected to focus on household chores rather than education. She attended school for a year but failed. Irregular attendance during harvest and cultivation of crops made it difficult for her to focus on her studies. When her elder sister married, household responsibilities shifted to Anita, forcing her to leave school. While her brothers attended school, her elder sisters did not, though her three younger sisters eventually passed the School Leaving Certificate (SLC) and married. Anita married at 17, and further education was out of her imagination.

Reflecting on the past, she shared, *"Sixty years ago, it wasn't easy for girls. Society had strict rules. We weren't allowed to go to school; we had to learn household chores to sustain ourselves after marriage"*. Describing the changes demanded by time, she quoted, *"Over time, people began to understand the value of education. Girls started attending school. I didn't get the opportunity of education, and after marriage, I couldn't even imagine it"*.

Anita's experience highlights how household responsibility, particularly for girls, was the priority over education, resulting in their dropping out of school. Her experience aligns with the findings by Dhital et al. (2021), which show the impact of water accessibility on girls' educational attainment in rural Nepal. Specifically, for every additional hour spent fetching water, the likelihood of completing primary

school decreased by 17% among girls aged 14-16. In Anita's case, her frequent absence from school due to agricultural and household duties resulted in poor attendance, ultimately causing her to fail a class. Unlike boys, as Dhital et al. (2021) noted, the opportunity to repeat classes was not with her; it was the end of her schooling.

### **Chapter Summary**

In the context of Nepal during the 1970s and 1980s, when my research participants were of schooling age, girls attending school were often withdrawn from marriage, as early marriage was a common societal practice at the time (Levine et al., 2004). The perception of parents and families is often a barrier for girls in accessing education, since girls are liabilities and boys are assets for them. Society thinks that investing in girls' education is not beneficial. Similarly, social norms promoting gender biases are prevalent and deeply rooted in the values that girls are subordinate and submissive. Gender discrimination is in practice at work, family, and even in schools. It is a barrier for girls in their schooling. Poverty is the primary reason for my research participants not attending school, but in the same place, their brothers were at school. Thus, it indicates that girls' education was of low priority and less valued in society.

## CHAPTER-V

### BREAKING THE BOUNDARIES: WOMEN RETURN TO SCHOOL

This chapter delves into women's experiences and their reasons for resuming their education. Following marriage, their lives centered on their family and children, leaving little room for personal pursuits such as education. The demands of family life often overshadowed any thoughts of study. The inability to read and write presented significant challenges and complexities in their lives. Their educational limitations hindered their ability to pursue their dreams, aspirations, and professions they desired. They encountered various instances, realizations, and moments that reinforced them to join NFE.

#### **Complexity of City, Modern, and Married Life**

The lives of Sunita, Sabina, Pasang, and Radha took a significant turn in their marriages. Each of them found themselves in a new environment and family dynamics. Sunita's decision to elope led to a prolonged period of reintegration with her family, marked by feelings of isolation and loneliness that often overwhelmed her. Sunita cried for months, reminiscing about her sisters, family, and friends.

Amid the chaos of Kathmandu, Pasang found herself lost in the crowd. Memories of her family, friends, and the serene beauty of her village flooded her mind, often bringing tears to her eyes. A similar experience was with Radha, who left her beautiful village, Ramechhap, to start a new chapter in her life in Kathmandu.

At the young age of 14, Sabina was in a forced marriage. She was not prepared for the complexities of married life. She was unaware of the relationship between husband and wife, leaving her uncomfortable with her husband's presence. With her husband employed at Dwarika Hotel, her uncle believed he would take her responsibility, easing the family's concern about her, and married her off.

After the marriage, all participants moved to their husbands' places, which were different from their villages. With limited literacy skills, they faced various challenges in adopting a new environment. The complexity of each participant has been categorized into different headings for better understanding and unfolding the series of experiences.

### Limited Independence

Sabina relied entirely on her husband, who took care of everything from attending their daughters' school to managing their finances. However, when her husband fell ill, her life took a turn as she had to bear the responsibility of caring for him amidst his numerous hospital visits and treatments. With no one to assist her, the sole responsibility of raising young children added a challenge to her. Sabina faced the daunting task alone. The diagnosis of her husband's testicular cancer shattered her world. She could not think of anything, and amidst confusion, she decided on his surgery. Her inability to read and write made the situation worse for her. During hospital stays, she had to get help from others in locating medical shops, reading medicines, and more. Explaining her challenges in the hospital and bank work, she reflected on how she dealt with the outer world,

*I used to feel very bad; I used to cry. Before, I did not use to talk with people, but during my husband's treatment, I had to speak with people and started to talk. I used to ask for help from people in the bank, but they ignored me. The people used to feel bothered and express their anger to me.*

Sabina did not know how to write the details on the cheques, so she had to ask for the help of the staff at the bank, but they did not respond to her appropriately. With irritation and astonishment, they questioned her ability and reasons for not being educated. She used to feel very bad about people's responses. Later, she realized that getting help from the bank staff was not good. She asked for help from a friend's sister for bank work, who accompanied her for a few visits, but she did not want to bother her anymore, knowing her disinterest. She started to visit the bank alone and took help from random people and staff, even tolerating their words. Every time, she realized that individuals get into trouble when they cannot read and write, making them dependent on others.

Pasang, an 18-year-old from a rural village, shared similar struggles. She arrived in Kathmandu full of hope for better opportunities, but the bustling city overwhelmed her. Once vibrant and confident, Pasang became silent and withdrawn. She had a feeling of loneliness and alienation. The city, busy streets, and crowds were like a maze for her, and she could not navigate it. Everywhere seemed the same to her, and her inability to read the name board left her lost and confused in the city.

Sabina's and Pasang's stories provide a glimpse into the struggles faced by women with limited literacy skills. Their experience highlights how their inability to

read and write alienated them in a new city. They had to struggle for independence and opportunity, and illiteracy was a barrier to their efforts to connect with the world around them. Their stories echo Mageswari's (2022) findings, which illustrate how non-literate women face difficulties in tasks such as reading bus name boards or traveling alone. These challenges restrict their mobility and leave them vulnerable and excluded from the world of letters.

### **A feeling of Embarrassment and Emotional Distress**

Sunita discovered that her husband had only a few utensils, beds, and bedding when she reached his room after marriage. His earnings, i.e., Rs 4,000 per month, were insufficient for their living. She thought of running a tailoring business, investing her savings, and investing with two other friends in partnership. However, their partnership did not last long, and she was the only one to look after work. She had people's comments for her carelessness in her baby care and work. Her husband was supportive and helped with her household work. Her continuous hard work earned good customers and income.

The customers were different, and dealing with them was not easy for her. She felt embarrassed many times when she could not understand the items they asked for, and did not make sales of the available items in her shop. The literacy class helped her to read basic Nepali words. She could also write in Nepali, though her grammar and spelling were not proper. However, English words were not within her capacity. She shared her difficulties,

*One day, a customer came asking for a hanky, and I did not know that [Rumal] is called a hanky in English. Another day, a customer asked for shock, and I did not understand his request. I sent the customers away for both days without selling the available items in my shop. Customers used to laugh at my writing and make remarks on writing errors and style.*

Sunita had a feeling of inferiority due to the comments of clients at her work. Dealing with professionals like doctors and engineers filled her with nervousness and anxiety due to her insecurities about her writing and reading abilities. Recounting a particularly hurtful incident, she recalled a client's disdainful reaction to her writing on a bill, leaving her deeply ashamed of her inadequacies. Despite her best efforts, she often made errors in the calculations. She had returned more money than the actual amount to customers. Each time, her capabilities were questioned, and she

experienced embarrassment. She thought of quitting. However, her circumstances forced her to continue as it was her only means of earning.

Another participant, Sabina, shared a similar experience of humiliation. Sabina couldn't save her husband, not even investing their savings and everything in his treatment. With the sole responsibility, she moved on with her life, though it was not easy for her. During a visit to her daughters' schools, she was asked to sign the document and felt very embarrassed to say that she could not read and write in front of many people. That was the most embarrassing moment for her; she felt that people judged me. She also profoundly realized that the situation could be different if she had gone to school. Explaining many other difficulties that are associated with educational limitations, she shared her challenges while traveling,

*Even though I was born and raised in Kathmandu, I have not traveled much. I used to ask for a location wherever I traveled. For me, any words on the name board, direction board, bus, or anything like 'Kalo Akshar Bhaisi Barabar [Printed alphabets in black are like buffalo]. ' Once, I took the wrong bus to Bhaktapur Hospital and had to walk for an hour to reach the hospital. The driver scolded me badly when I made a mistake with the location.*

The story of Sabina and Sunita sheds light on women's challenges with limited education. They often struggle with reading, writing, and calculations when handling personal tasks or interacting with others. Sunita had a skill, but her lack of proficiency in literacy, particularly in understanding English terms, writing correctly, and making accurate calculations, led to a sense of inferiority. This feeling of inadequacy affected her confidence, self-esteem, and presence when dealing with clients. Her limited literacy skill was the reason for her sense of inadequacy and self-doubt, and that feeling prompted her to join NFE. Not only to improve literacy, she sought to gain freedom, a sense of self-identity, and personal and professional well-being. The finding aligns with the study of Wolf et al. (2007), which reveals that individuals with limited literacy often experience shame and inadequacy, particularly when their illiteracy is disclosed. There was also a feeling of low self-esteem and confidence among those who could not read. The study by Mtika and Abbott (2023) also agrees with this finding that a person who cannot read and write has a feeling of low self-esteem and confidence. These feelings decrease a sense of self-worth and quality of life, as reflected in Sunita and Sabina's journey.

### **Absence of Informed Choices Impacting Women's Health**

Sabina was only 14 years old when she was married. She had an adjustment problem with her new family. She was married right after her first menstruation, and did not have much idea about menstrual hygiene and management. She felt very uncomfortable and embarrassed when she had her period. She could neither share her situation with her husband nor with other family members. She did not have the idea to use a sanitary pad. She used a cloth pad during her menstruation. The period days were very painful to her, but she did not consult a doctor for medication. Sometimes, she experienced a blood flow all over the place where she rested. Adding her experience in her own words,

*I did not go to school. If I had studied, I could have learned about menstrual hygiene and women's health. I would not have married at a young age if I had been to school. I would not have become a mother at 16 and again at 18.*

The story of Sabina highlights the importance of reproductive health education for women. Despite having the right to this information, Sabina was not informed about reproductive health and its significance. According to her, school could have been her first source of knowledge. She could have learned about reproductive health and the potential consequences of pregnancy at a young age. Unfortunately, she missed out on this opportunity. Her story reveals the role of education in shaping a young woman's understanding of her health and body. These findings align with the report of UNESCO (2017), which says that literacy positively impacts their health in practicing family planning, nutrition, and sanitation, and literate women are more likely to ensure that children are vaccinated.

The vision of the Incheon Declaration Education 2030 reflects the importance of education in women's lives, which focuses on the interconnection between health, literacy, and gender equality in lifelong learning opportunities. In addition, it states that education is crucial in improving an individual's health and transferring impacts to future generations (UNESCO, 2015). UNESCO, the Incheon Declaration, and the story of Sabina highlight the ripple effect of deprivation and illustrate how learning goes beyond academic knowledge. The learning equips individuals with life skills, awareness, and the ability to make choices that shape their future. In Sabina's case, the lack of education about reproductive health prevented her from making informed choices about her health and life decisions. Her association with the school could have

helped her understand the health complications of early marriage that could ultimately influence her life decisions.

### **Limited Job Opportunities**

Sunita, Sabina, and Pasang struggled to survive in the city where every penny mattered. They started to search for employment. Sunita found work at a carpet factory but had to get training. Fortunately, the basic essential reading and writing skills she acquired through an adult literacy class helped her during training, and she passed her examination. Her joy was short-lived; one of her teachers falsely informed the factory boss that she had failed the exam. The boss was from another country, and Sunita could not speak English to explain. She felt worried, but another teacher stepped in to help her bring the reality, and she got to keep her job at the factory. At that instant, she realized that with higher education, she would have access to better job opportunities and the ability to handle everything independently.

Pasang faced numerous obstacles in Kathmandu due to her lack of formal education. Despite her determination, job opportunities were limited, with employers often prioritizing educational qualifications. The constant questioning frustrated Pasang, sensing failure to secure employment. Her inability to read and write hindered her pursuit. At first, it prevented her from being a tourist guide and later a driver. When she failed in her attempts, she joined a carpet factory and later ran a hotel.

Juggling financial constraints and the responsibilities of single parenthood, Sabina had endured five years since her husband's passing. At 37 years old, she experienced different life colours and gained a profound understanding of the value of education through her varied experiences. She had often faced scolds and harsh words from people for discarding documents and paper, unaware of their significance, while working as a helper in different households. She worked at the pharmacy, where her primary job was packaging medicine and preparing tea for the staff. She had to get help from one of the staff there to read out the names of medicines in Nepali, and English was not her capacity. However, she could read and memorize medicine names in Nepali after enrolling in school. I could note down information such as the names of individuals dropping off cheques, cheque numbers, phone numbers, and dates of transactions. Recently, Sabina faced another setback when she had to leave her job due to the organization's preference for a candidate with good reading and writing



skills. It was unpleasant for her to quit her job, which was the only way of earning a living. She explained the situation with sadness,

*It was my first office, and my owner knew that I was uneducated. My previous employer knew my educational background. The situation changed when new management took over. With frequent visits of foreign customers seeking services and information, the communication in English and computer skills became essential. I did not have those abilities; thus, I had to leave my job. I have heard that the pharmacy is providing a good salary, Rs. 22,000 per month for this post now”.*

Even though Radha was the wife of a government employee, she had to earn money to support her family when they moved to Kathmandu. She began to work in the Pashmina factory, where she learned the intricate process of making pashmina products. At that time, her children were just 8 and 9 years old. Radha was responsible for factory labeling, washing, coloring pashmina, and embroidery. After gaining years of experience, Radha and her friends started their pashmina factory.

*We mainly wove pashmina shawls and sweaters, and gave employment to many women. Our products were even exported internationally. For 3-4 years, the factory ran successfully. However, we faced a setback when a product was returned due to stains. We had a financial loss worth 1.5 lakhs. We had to sell the factory.*

After selling the factory, Radha joined an organization run by foreigners to continue supporting her family for a living and her children's education. The allocated salary for his position was Rs. 1,500, her limited English proficiency did not allow for direct communication with her boss about her salary. Taking advantage of this, her employer paid her only Rs. 1,200 per month. After years, her boss discovered this reality, and her salary was increased to Rs. 5,000, recognizing her hard work and dedication.

My research participants' struggles for employment signify the relationship between education and opportunities. Pasang, for instance, could not pursue her dream career due to being non-literate, while Sabina and Sunita had to settle for whatever jobs were available. As the job market evolved, they were required to upgrade their skills. However, for Sabina, it was a challenge. Despite her ability to perform her regular tasks, her lack of computer and English language skills forced her to quit her job. Similar to this finding, Yeoh and Chu (2012) point out that literacy

opens the door to better employment opportunities by enabling individuals to acquire the skills to excel in the workplace. Literacy is the foundation of lifelong learning (McKay, 2018) that opens the opportunity for further learning and increases the chance of employability by enhancing their knowledge and skills. From the stories of my research participants, it can be said that education is a prerequisite for employment, and individuals have to adopt continuous learning of new skills to compete in the labor market.

### **Communication Barrier**

Anita remembers the emotional outbreak when her husband was not with her. She missed her family and husband deeply. With no mobile phones or internet, the only means of communication was letters. Her husband used to send letters, which she had others read, but she always wished she could read his words herself. She kept his letters safely under her pillow so that she could see and feel the letters written by her beloved husband. Once her letters disappeared, at that moment, she wished, *“I felt if I could read and write, I could have memorized each word and replied with my thoughts about my life, interests, and wishes”*. Recalling her days when she was distant from her husband, she explained the moment,

*I got married to a person from another village in the Bhojpur district. After our marriage, my husband went to India to work. The place and family were very new to me, and I felt very sad when my husband left me. I wished to return to my family, but a married woman couldn't. I used to think of my husband. My husband used to write letters, and I needed help from other people to read his letters. They might also read out letters in different ways (she laughed). I safely kept all his letters, but my sister-in-law and brother-in-law disappeared those letters. At that moment, I cried a lot.*

Telephones had just arrived in Bhojpur's shops, but calls were expensive. Later, Anita's husband moved to Kathmandu, and occasionally, she called her husband. While listening to Anita's experience, my memory lane took me to my conversation with my aunties at home. Married to the army, the couple used to be out of contact for years as they did not have mobile and internet facilities like these days. Sometimes, they would receive letters, and the only thing my aunties could do was wait for holidays to meet their husbands.

Communication is the exchange of messages between two people, and it connects to the well-being of the interpersonal relationship (Segrin, 2014). Being

physically distant from her husband meant that the letter was Anita's only medium of communication. However, her inability to read and write made her feel lonely and isolated. In Anita's case, lack of literacy hindered her from connecting with her husband and exercising her freedom of expression.

### **Conflict in the Relationship**

In Kathmandu's new environment, Pasang was adjusting to herself, and at that time, she felt anxious about her economic situation. She started to run a hotel in her capacity, and life was at its own pace. Things changed when she did not feel respectful behavior from her husband. She expressed her situation, *"Everything was fine at the beginning. My husband had known that I was not educated before marriage, but later he started to call me illiterate. I felt humiliated, and I could not tolerate it"*. Her husband did not come home for days and did not even give her money. So, she had difficulty managing expenses for her children's education, food, and living. She had to bear sole responsibility for her children and family.

While listening to her, I could see the pain on her face. Understanding her situation, I told her she could skip this part if she was not comfortable, but she wanted to share since her story could inspire others. She continued, *"Whenever he was angry, he called me 'illiterate.' I felt mad and cried a lot"*. For the sake of her children, she stayed silent for years, but her patience also had limitations. Their 14-year relationship ended in divorce. At that time, her eldest daughter was 11, her middle child was 7, and her younger son was 6. She felt so inadequate that she started to search for a school right after her divorce. She shared, *"I could not get along with my husband because I could not read and write. To experience what it would be like to be literate, I grabbed a pen and a copy, a day after my divorce. I started to search for a school"*.

Pasang's story is a powerful reflection on the challenges of illiteracy on an individual's personal and economic life. Her experience in Kathmandu reveals the difficulties of adjusting to a new environment and the feeling of humiliation of being labeled as 'worthless' because of her illiteracy. Her story demonstrates how illiteracy not only limits access to opportunities but can also lead to feelings of disrespect and devaluation in one's family.

### **Obstacles in Political Representation**

My research participants, Sunita and Radha, were interested in politics. Radha was actively engaged in politics, but her engagement slowed down with the family

and childcare responsibilities. Sunita was not involved in politics earlier, but was actively involved in community work. The election in 2022 in Nepal pulled their candidacy for the post of Deputy Mayor for Sunita and Member of Parliament for Radha. Sharing about political engagement, Sunita expressed:

*“Brother, who taught me in a literacy class, approached me during the local election of 2078 BS. I gave my candidacy as Deputy Mayor from one of the political parties of Nepal. In the election campaign, I was supposed to address the masses. As I grabbed a microphone to speak, I started to shake in fear and could not even utter a word. At that moment, I felt guilty about being uneducated. I could speak if I had an educational qualification. I felt terrible, and I could not even sleep that night.*

Later, Sunita told her husband, *“I have a home, family, children, and everything, but I don’t have educational qualifications; therefore, I could not speak at the forum”*. After realizing her limitations, she asked her husband to search for a school for her. Using different references, Sunita and her husband could find the school. The school was especially opened for adult women’s education.

Radha was from a family with a political background, which influenced her to participate in political activities. She was interested in politics from an early age because she had heard much from her father about political parties and agendas. She was open to learning from her childhood. She used to listen to political news and was interested in the field of politics. She married very young but continued to participate in political activities whenever permitted. She was unsatisfied with the party she joined first. Later, she joined another party. In both parties, she discovered a feeling of competitiveness. Radha was strong enough to speak and express her opinions, which helped her move forward. People used to appreciate her active engagement and contribution to the party. Listening to her opinion, people used to think she was an intellectual woman. The people's expectations did not match her reality, which always made her feel lacking. Whenever the opportunity came, her educational limitation was a barrier. With the feeling of guilt for not pursuing education, Radha reflected:

*My husband was in the Nepal Army, and I traveled with him to different districts in Nepal. There, I could see the women’s situation. I was interested in politics. So, I could do something for women. I am now the chairperson of the Inter-Political Women's Network. I could have been in a good position with my educational degree. We need a degree in every field, even in politics.*

Radha shared her closeness with the former president of Nepal, who used to appreciate her suggestions for her political career. Further, she explained that her political career started as a ward member and then as a central committee member. In the election, she had received financial support from her father, though her father was from a different political party. Recalling her election campaign and political career, she shared,

*I listened to my friend and joined politics. I was only 24 then, and there was a Maoist conflict in Nepal. I had small children, and my husband was in the army. Many people questioned my commitment to the party. I started my political career as a ward and central committee member. I also got the candidacy for Member of Parliament in the last election, but lost. I could have done a better election campaign if I had been educated. I could have better influenced people with my words. I would have won the election as well.*

The stories of Sunita and Radha reflect the challenges of women's participation in politics. Since politics is a male-dominated field (Sapkota, 2024), women encounter significant barriers to gaining access and recognition, and access to politics by women is much more challenging. For women with limited education, like Radha and Sunita, the struggle to establish a political identity becomes even harder. As Sapkota (2024) notes, social and cultural factors that perceive women as inferior to men further complicate their ability to compete in this arena. Therefore, women aspiring to enter politics must have public speaking skills, self-esteem, and confidence to navigate this competitive environment. Literacy skills are crucial in women's roles in this journey to prepare them for leadership roles.

### **The Conflict between Social Expectation and Reality**

Radha was socially and politically active, having years of experience dealing with the public and solving their problems. She gained recognition in society as a knowledgeable and capable woman. As a trainer, she even traveled to Korea to train women on political empowerment and other training organized by IPWN. In her community, she was respected as a woman of knowledge and potential. However, this social recognition and expectations created an internal conflict since she only had a primary-level education. In her own words, she shared her conflict,

*I could sign my name, and people appreciated my writing and signature style. The people used to regard me as a highly educated woman. I am sharing one incident. Years back, I was traveling on a bus, and there was a discussion*

*between the support staff and a passenger. There, I mediated their argument, and people appreciated my abilities. People thought I had a higher education since I could handle the situation.*

Despite her public image, Radha was aware of the gap created by her educational limitations. She realized she needed to bridge his educational gap to meet society's expectations and build her confidence as an “educated” woman. Motivated to align her self-perception with social expectations, Radha enrolled in school. She aimed to empower herself and turn society’s expectations towards her into reality, establishing her identity as an educated woman.

### **The Inner Desire to Break the Barrier**

Sunita and Sabina, women with a burning desire for education, faced numerous challenges due to their lack of formal schooling. Despite their struggles, both women clung to the hope of learning, believing in the transformative power of education, especially for women marginalized by society. For Sunita, the longing for knowledge was a constant amid the daily embarrassment due to educational limitations. She took every opportunity to learn, even copying pages from her daughter’s books and reading storybooks in the evening. Despite her efforts to self-educate, she felt the need for school. However, she could not find a school and did not even get a tutor until she discovered a women's school in Chabahil. She happily enrolled on the day of her school visit and appreciated the flexible class hours.

Sabina’s journey to education was marked by eleven years of searching for school. She was so determined to overcome illiteracy that she copied the alphabet from her children's books and learned basic mathematics from her husband. With her eagerness to learn and strong realization of the need for education, she was ultimately able to enroll in the school. She was happy and excited, knowing she was in the school she had been looking for a long time. She had repeatedly asked the Principal, “*Really, does the school teach me?*”. Just after her first day of school, there was a lockdown with the irregular running of classes, but Sabina continued to come to classes. With the joy, she exclaimed,

*I have not missed a single class. Even if I woke up late, I rushed to school. I will miss a lot even if I miss a class. Learning a new word gives me a happiness, like the children when they get chocolate. Here, I interact with my friends, which has helped me to build my speaking skills. Previously, I did not know how the school looked or how it functions. My teachers are very good;*

*they don't mind answering our silly questions and repeating the same question. I don't know how children learn in school. I could not experience it, but this is the school I have been looking for years.*

Sabina understands that learning can happen either through experience or study. She relates the stories of her textbook to her story, *"It feels comforting to know that many other people have suffered like me. I have a close friend in my class. We have shared everything about each other"*. Sabina and her friend share similar experiences of struggle, poverty, and challenges of being non-literate.

All of my research participants are highly motivated to attend their classes, driven by a strong desire to learn and overcome the challenges of being non-literate. Pasang's story is inspiring. She kept learning even at work. She mentioned how she learned English while working and remained determined to continue her learning even after returning to Nepal. She had put much effort into finding the school of her choice and needs. She is now happy to be a student in her 50s. A similar commitment to learning can be seen in Sunita and Sabina, who also refused to give up. They continued to learn at home, with their children, and through any available means. Their deep desire to overcome the challenges of being non-literate and an intense learning attitude drove them to participate in non-formal education. As mentioned by Cronin-Golomb and Bauer (2022), self-motivation is vital to learning throughout the lifespan, and this learning motivation was highly observed in the participants. They tried to learn from their family members and through other means. Their strong self-motivation was key to joining the school and continue learning at a later age.

Additionally, the learners engage in self-directed learning. They make their efforts to learn (Xiang, 2022) both at home and at school. Their motivation was so strong that they would read their children's textbooks and continue to seek support for their studies. Their determination to receive an education is also evident in their persistent search for a suitable school for their learning. They kept on practicing lifelong learning informally and then non-formal mode of learning.

### **Chapter Summary**

No single life event prompted my participants to join the school. Instead, a series of experiences leading to embarrassment and low self-esteem collectively motivated each individual to pursue education. For Sunita, she could not speak in public. In the case of Sabina, the loss of her husband, a divorce for Pasang, and a lack of leadership opportunities for Radha were pivotal in making them realize the

importance of education for their personal and professional development, and their self-motivated learning attitudes encouraged them to join the school.



## CHAPTER VI

### CHALLENGING THE SOCIAL NORMS TO EMBRACE THE LIFE OF OWN

This chapter presents the changes women experienced after participating in NFE. Linking to Sen's Capability approach, this chapter presents the changes the women have experienced in their capability in terms of their knowledge and skills after they developed the ability to read and write. These changes are categorized and thematized in different themes, including the differences the participants have experienced at their personal, family, and professional levels.

#### **Feeling Self-confident and High Self-esteem**

Sabina has observed gradual changes in her capability and people's perception of her. She happily stated that her children behaved differently as she started studying. They encourage and support her in her studies. She does not have to seek the help of other people to locate places, do basic bank work, and calculate, and she can travel freely without the tension of choosing the wrong tempo or bus. With a bright smile on her face, she shared,

*My children did not urge me to visit their schools because I could not read and write. They always wanted their father for their schoolwork. Now, I can sign my name. I can read Nepali and some English words, too, so my children have started to believe in me. The last time I visited their schools and I even did a signature in English (She giggled).*

Sabina felt so happy when she could do her signature, write her name, and read. Now, her children don't feel embarrassed taking her to their schools. She can interact with their teachers and ask about their performances. The schooling experience has provided her with subject matter to discuss with her children's teacher. In addition, she has started performing basic bank work. The ability to perform the task independently has given her the confidence to speak with others and understand and relate to the topics discussed. She illustrated changes she observed, "I received a cheque for my salary with a low amount, which was 8,090 instead of 9,090. Before, I used to receive any amount without question, but this time, I asked about the reason for the deduction, and the office had to explain it. Inquiring to reason, she learned about tax deductions and acknowledged the school for developing her ability to recognize the figures in the cheques.

While listening to Sabina's story, I remembered my school day. My mother did not know how to write signatures in English, and every time I asked my father to write signatures on my examination sheet and any documents from my school. Most of us used to have our father in the parents' meeting and result distribution day, as we probably thought that our father could deliver well and interact with teachers because they knew how to read and write well. The experience of Sabina helped me to get into the part of a mother who never expressed her feelings when we behaved differently with her than with our father.

Nowadays, Sabina feels empowered to read and write. With the capability of reading and writing, she can independently perform daily activities of traveling, financial transactions, and interaction with people. She is interested in reading books, and after reading, she feels like reading more and more books. With the upgrade in class, she even understands that knowledge does not have limits. She has learned many things from her life and has realized that these experiences and learning are not enough. Knowledge from textbooks and classes is vital to enhancing life skills, boosting our confidence, and being independent. The ability to read and write enhances an individual's capability to perform any task independently and confidently, ultimately transforming individuals with the traits of self-reliance, strong self-esteem, and empowerment.

Bingman and Ebert (2000) conducted case studies of 10 learners of adult literacy programs in the United States. The study found that the learners had greater self-esteem than before joining the program. They expressed similar feelings as my research participants did, such as "*I feel good about myself*" and "*I feel like I'm somebody*". Another study with 36 rural non-literate women revealed that they don't participate in community meetings because they think they are not considered knowledgeable (Stromquist, 2008). Similar is the case of Sabina, my research participant, who never went to her children's school because she had thought that she was not considered capable by their children of speaking and interacting with their school teachers.

While jotting down these narratives of my research participants, one of the Bollywood movies came to mind: the movie of a mother who does not speak English frequently. Thus, her daughter gets in a rage when her mother visits her school for a meeting instead of her father. The daughter feels embarrassed when her mother talks with her principal in Hindi, shows her temper all the way home, and complains about

her mother's inadequacy. This movie scene and the story of Sabina align with the findings of Bingman and Ebert (2000) and the case studies mentioned by Stromquist (2008). All these reveal that non-literate women step back regarding their participation and engagement in the community or meetings as they feel they are assumed to be incapable. However, after participating in NFE, they have built their confidence in making opinions and asking questions.

### **Enhanced Life Skills and Family Management**

After completing all her household chores every night, Sunita takes time to read and do her homework. Before bed, she reads a storybook, which she keeps under her pillow. She believed that education gives us the liberty to live our own lives. She expressed happiness at meeting her new friends at school. She learned about their struggles and life lessons from them, which has helped her know society better. Similarly, Sabina also feels safe in the class. Initially, she thought that she was the only person facing problems in life, but listening to the stories of other women made her realize that everyone has struggles. The collective sharing in class has helped her overcome her sufferings and move forward, hoping for a better future.

Sunita further shared that in the class, the teachers discuss news of the world and teach about practical strategies for our lives that have helped her resolve family problems and maintain a healthy family environment. Her books include lessons on family, cleanliness, and waste management, which she applies at home. Sometimes, she even encourages her children to read her lessons so they can learn and implement these ideas. Sunita particularly enjoys reading stories and has learned valuable knowledge from them. The story about how educated grandparents create an educated family deeply resonated with her. She reflected on how much she and her children could have learned if her in-laws had been part of their lives.

Sabina has also noticed significant changes in herself since joining the class. She once felt hopeless, but now she feels optimistic about her life. She expressed joy in learning and aspires to help those out of education. Reading stories and interacting with friends have given her the strength to overcome her hardship, and she now understands that everyone faces challenges. This realization has brought relief and hope for brighter days ahead. Being able to read lines of stories to understand their meaning, Sabina expressed her happiness in her own words,

*Even though I started late, I feel fortunate to be studying now. Many are unaware of schools like this or lack interest in learning. Education is valuable.*

*It empowers us to be independent. Reading, writing, and performing my tasks independently is a huge accomplishment.*

From the experience of Sunita and Sabina, it can be evident that the class goes beyond reading and writing. It serves as a space to share their stories, learn from each other, and build coping mechanisms. The stories they read, practical life skill lessons, and interaction with their friends have helped them manage their family and create a harmonious life. They have also acquired communication skills through frequent interactions with friends and teachers.

NFE focuses on practical life skills, personal development, and communication skills (Khasnabis et al., 2010). Similarly, informal learning has been observed among learners, as this type of learning takes place in various settings and is often unstructured and unintended without the presence of a teacher (Eraut, 2004). The interaction between learners, which helps them gain knowledge and skills to overcome challenges, is a key example of informal learning. It means that individuals can learn informally from each other, highlighting that learning does not always require formal teachers or mentors.

### **Aspiration for a Professional Career**

Spending 14 years in Israel and working at a care home, Pasang gained much knowledge of medicine and caregiver skills. She developed an aspiration to be a professional nurse, but due to her lack of education, she cannot obtain a certificate or a license to enter the nursing profession. Thus, she joined the school expecting to complete SEE, take a certificate, and study nursing. She shared,

*I have a lot of knowledge of medicine. I know many things about the patients' care. However, I cannot take responsibility because I don't have an educational certificate or license. Therefore, I wish to complete my SEE, take a certificate, and study nursing. As I get a certificate, I can work. This is my dream. Let's see how far I can go. I want to connect my experience with my profession.*

Pasang had years of caregiving experience but could not pursue a higher degree in nursing because she lacked a formal educational background. She can even teach the Hebrew language to a lower level, but cannot due to the lack of educational qualifications. For her, certification is powerful, which is echoed in her statement, “*I will be stronger if I get a certificate. At a young age, I did not get this opportunity to*

*study. I was diverted to earning. Now, this is my wish to study, and hope my children support me”.*

NFE has supported her educational journey, allowing her to complete her studies faster than formal education. However, it is also realized that recognition of years of accumulated skills would have benefited her professional growth.

Pasang’s experience highlights the importance of recognizing the prior skills of those who possess experience and abilities. She must follow a formal process to validate her knowledge and skills without recognition. Her situation resonates with the insight of Singh (2015), who highlights that not everyone can access formal education and achieve specific outcomes. Additionally, there is a widening gap between education and employment and between those with and without resources. This disparity is due to a lack of mobilization of human capacities, skills, and resources acquired through non-formal and informal learning.

### **Living a Life of Choice**

Sunita has always been passionate about reading stories and writing stories, and poems. She used to take time from her household chores and work, and read storybooks. She was so willing to understand more and more about human life and the world, but her limited reading ability prevented her from reading a single story. She had to pause every word and took an hour to complete reading a page; sometimes, it was also frustrating. However, her determination paid off. Now, she has developed the ability to read and write fluently. She immerses herself in the stories and understands their meanings. In addition, she has begun writing poems and intends to write her own story, highlighting her struggle and perseverance in learning.

Sunita’s passion for reading and writing has become a joyful hobby. She is also preparing for the upcoming local election for the position of Deputy Mayor. She has developed a dream to run classes for people deprived of education. She aims to educate those who are landless and economically poor. It’s heart-rending for her to see elderly people in misery who are forced to leave their houses by their children. She wants to serve them and open a care home for them. In her own words, Sunita expresses her joy in the learning journey.

*I always intended to read and write. I could not complete reading the single story. Now, I can easily read the story and understand the meaning of each word. I am interested in creative writing. On the anniversary of my school, I*

*received the award for poem recitation and debate completion. I was pleased with my achievement.*

Another participant shared a similar aspiration, Sabina, who dreams of helping people who are not literate. She plans to start her own business, applying the skills and knowledge gained through her learning. She is determined to prove her capabilities and inspire others to pursue education to discover their potential.

Sunita and Sabina had broken the barrier; if they had not, they would not have explored their potential and would not have lived a life of their choice. The stories highlight the importance of self-awareness, which is all about understanding who we are, recognizing our capabilities, and knowing how to use our talents. This self-awareness is key for personal growth and our ability to contribute to our society. It involves understanding ourselves and connecting with others through our actions (Gibbs & Angelides, 2010). Connecting this to Amartya Sen's capability approach, we can say that if individuals are provided with education and support, they can build their future and contribute positively to society.

### **Political Participation**

For both Sunita and Radha, their classes and the skills they have developed have narrowed the distance between them and their dream of political leadership. They shared that their learning at school contributes to boosting their confidence to compete with other candidates within their political party and other parties. Like other participants, Sunita and Radha get the space to interact with other women in the school. Interaction and discussion improve their speaking skills and provide ideas about women's needs that should be raised as political agendas. Similarly, Sunita actively participates in debate competitions and other extracurricular activities at her school, which have developed her ability to face the public. She now writes her speeches and prepares herself for the next election. Similar changes are made with Radha; she is a regular in her classes and willing to learn more. She feels that the ability she has gained from her education will benefit her political career and other professional pathways. Reflecting on her journey, Sunita shared her preparation for the political future.

*I used to feel afraid of mistakes in calculations and billing. Now, I feel confident in my abilities. I could not deliver the speech in front of a crowd, which became the reason for the loss of the election. I feel so embarrassed. Looking back, my mother gave me a sickle to cut the fodder instead of a*

*pencil, and that's why I could not attend school. But I don't blame her because she worked hard to raise her children. Now, I have grabbed the opportunity to learn and hold a pen to write my story.*

Sunita was happy to share about securing the first position in her class and preparing for the election. She frequently takes part in debates and speech competitions. She interacts with my friends and teachers to learn about current issues, which helps her identify political agendas that must be addressed. Usually, she read books related to women's struggles, revolution, and their movements. She is reading the story of Karl Marx's wife, Jenny Marx. Their stories make her feel empowered and inspired to make changes in society.

Politically active, Radha aspires to be a leader and establish herself as a role model, showcasing that women can be economically, socially, and politically empowered. She said, *"I am not studying for any certificate at this age. I am here to gain knowledge, which has given me more confidence in empowering women"*. The life of my research participants was not a bed of roses; they experienced hardship during childhood and married life, and this continues to the present. Seeing their brothers and other children attending school was not pleasant, but the social and family situation did not permit them to pursue education. Now, they feel more responsible towards society and are determined to educate women and other marginalized groups, as they understand that knowledge is power and that no one understands better than them.

According to Latchem (2018), children in rural areas are twice as likely as those in urban areas to be out of school, and children from the wealthiest 20% are 400% more likely than the poorest 20% are likely to attend school. Girls are four times more likely to be out of school than boys (p.64). This data illustrates the inequalities in education access, particularly for girls in rural areas. In response to these challenges, the role of NFE has been observed to be significant in reaching these groups of people who are deprived of education. Enrolling in school has led to significant changes in the confidence and self-esteem of research participants. Those women who were once confined to their families have started to expand their role for the well-being of their community. Beyond basic literacy skills, they have developed personal and professional skills impacting their well-being. The acquired abilities have empowered and prepared them to pursue leadership roles and contribute to community development. This finding of my study aligns with that of Ahmadi (2020),

who suggests that NFE changes women's attitude of being dependent on their husbands for any economic activity. NFE helps to build interaction and communication skills so that they can grow professionally and contribute to the family economy.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter has explored the changes experienced by research participants after joining NFE. It was not easy for all participants to find a school that was suitable for them. They were impressed with the flexibility and learning environment when they discovered it. Some of them started with basic literacy skills, and the joy of learning the first letter was a significant and major achievement for them. As they progress, these women have not only begun to pursue their personal goals but also aim to use their newfound knowledge and skills in helping and community development.



## CHAPTER VII

### DISCUSSION

For my study, there were two different research questions. The first research question aimed to explore why women joined the school. For the first question, I generated themes connecting to my participants' experiences of being non-literate. I have explored their socio-economic and cultural context to understand their reasons for not joining schools. They were connected to the challenges they faced being non-literate, and the reasons for returning to school at an adult age. The second research question explored the changes they acquired in their reading and writing ability. This chapter discusses the study's findings extracted from these two research questions, integrating Amartya Sen's capability approach and different related literature.

#### **Framing Inequality in Education Access**

Before addressing the first research question, my study explored the socio-economic conditions of my research participants to understand the reasons for their educational deprivation. This exploration established a connection between their past, present, and future and revealed how their situation shaped their opportunities and limitations. Despite a strong interest in their education, women in my study could not continue. The reasons for this deprivation were poverty and the social structure that prefers sons to daughters in terms of education and other opportunities.

According to UNICEF (2018), girls from the poorest families are the least likely to enter the classroom. Enrollment reduces their chances of early marriage, but it is often not the case in Nepal. Like many other girls from low-income families, Anita, Sunita, Pasang, and Sabina faced challenges in attending school. Amid financial struggles, families frequently prioritize the education of boys over girls. A gender-biased attitude often reinforces this discriminatory practice (Khatri, 2022). Further, the study by Gyasi et al. (2023) reveals that the earning capacity and employment status of household heads affect the girls' education, making additional units in the earning level of households minimize the probability of school dropout among female children.

In many cases, girls who drop out of school are often forced into early marriages. Although this practice is gradually changing, it persists in the community where the preference for sons remains strong. The recent study of Dahal et al. (2023),

which involved teachers, district education staff, and students, reveals that gender preference significantly influences decisions regarding which child should continue education when families face financial constraints. These discriminatory practices, which were prevalent during my research participants' schooling age, prevented them from attending school.

Additionally, the report of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) (2023) highlights that gender-discriminatory social norms, which undervalue women's capabilities and rights, are barriers to their choice and capabilities. This societal expectation sets the boundaries for women, defining what they can do and who they become. The report also indicates that norms such as 'men make better political leaders than women do' and 'university is more important for men than for women' are barriers to gender equality and education opportunities for women.

The women in my study grew up in a setting where education was considered a rights for men, while women were expected to manage household responsibilities. The country was launching a program for women's education, but my participants faced multiple challenges in accessing education, even if they were interested. The exploration of this setting is essential in my study to understand how the socio-economic context of each participant influences each participant's ability to pursue education.

My participants dropped out of school and got married at an early age. Adjusting to a new life environment was challenging. Adapting to modern city life added more difficulties since everyday tasks like traveling, banking, shopping for groceries, and seeking medical treatment demanded the ability to read and write. Their lack of education deprived them of human rights such as the right to freedom, reproductive health, expression, and health, making them dependent on others for basic daily activities.

Sen (1999) similarly explains that gender inequality limits women's ability to develop their potential and be what they value. With the capability approach, my study argues that expanding women's opportunities is essential so they can achieve what they value and become agents of change, helping to extend the capabilities of others. On the other hand, my study also looks into the social context, aligning the capability approach, which considers that physical, political, and social contexts impact converting resources into freedoms and opportunities for acquiring education. This framing helps understand each participant's childhood and every factor

contributing to the participants' capability deprivation (Unterhalter et al., 2022). Dejaeghere and Lee (2011) urge that the capability approach needs to be integrated with a critical feminist perspective to truly understand how social structures marginalize women in accessing education.

From the participants, it is evident that education at an earlier age would have supported them in their professional journey, family management, and in achieving the life they aspired to and valued. For instance, Pasang had always dreamed of being a tourist guide, but her educational limitations prevented her from pursuing this career. Similarly, Radha shared that with higher education, she could have entered any field of interest, like the army, police, civil service, law, or journalism. She explained, *“I should have rather fought against my father and society for education.”* Both Radha and Sabina reflected that education could have empowered them to escape early marriage and fight against society's expectations. These aspirations, shared by research participants, explain how education could have changed their life chapters.

Amartya Sen's capability approach, which highlights the relationship between capability and functioning, is relevant here. Different socioeconomic factors did not allow them to pursue education, resulting in capability deprivation; they could not make choices in their life. As a result, they could not function for a dignified life, which is emphasized in both the human rights framework and the capability approach. Despite various aspirations in life, the participants could not achieve them since they were not fortunate enough to pursue education. The capability approach requires examining the factors that enable or hinder the realization of human rights, and my study findings suggest that cultural practices and norms prevented participants from realizing their right to education (Vizard et al., 2011). The capability approach has provided the framework for my study to examine whether the participants are enjoying human rights in a true sense. The approach has helped to understand human rights not just in the form of laws or resources, but in whether they are practically using available services, converting them into their freedom and capability. Similarly, the findings of my study have provided the insight that freedom depends on social and economic factors, as participants have experienced in their lives. These factors create a gap between individuals with and without freedom as it makes a difference in achieving their functioning.

In 1968, Rene Maheu, then Director General of UNESCO, presented at the International Conference on Human Rights, stating, 'One must first be able to read.' His message emphasized that the ability to understand, choose, and decide stems from literacy. The statement made over half a century ago becomes more relevant today as modernization and technological advancements increase demands for reading and writing for communication, employment, and life opportunities. Sen argues that literacy is a basic capability and a necessary condition for well-being, expanding women's freedom to achieve wider capabilities (Maddox, 2008). This approach helps us understand how education fosters well-being and how social and economic conditions contribute to educational access.

Social context and norms, as explained by the capability approach, are the factors that hindered participants from continuing or pursuing education. These factors persist in lives in the form of discrimination, such as early marriage, which keeps them away from educational opportunities. However, their strong desire for education eventually led them back to school, even later in life (Dajaeghere & Lee, 2011). In addition to the findings of this study, Gyasi et al. (2023) identified rural-urban migration as a factor that impacts girls' education since the migrated parents tend not to enroll their girls in school or often have their daughters drop out of school.

Sen's concept of freedom, which he describes as "the opportunity to achieve objectives that we value," is central to the capability approach. Capability represents the freedom to lead the kind of life one values, to do what one wants, and to be who one wants to be (Robeyns, 2003). Robeyns (2003) cites Sen (1983), noting that 'functioning' is achievement while 'capability' is the ability to achieve the functioning. Conversion factors, including personal, social, and environmental characteristics, influence the relationship between resources and functioning.

In my study, strong social characteristics such as social norms, discriminatory practices, and gender roles prevented women from converting resources into functioning. In a sense, even when schools were available, they lacked the freedom (capabilities) to choose education, as social and economic factors restricted their freedom. This deprivation of capability directly impacted their functioning as educated women. Applying the capability approach helped me better understand the social and personal contexts of these women and how these contexts relate to their capabilities and functioning.

Each participant faced different barriers that hindered their freedom to live the desired life and prevented them from achieving the functioning they aspired to. For instance, Sunita was eager to pursue education and made several attempts, but her father's resistance prevented her from fully realizing her capabilities. Similarly, poor economic conditions and a social structure prioritizing sons over daughters kept Sabina, Radha, Sunita, and Pasang from attending school. Despite their deep interest in education, they were well familiar with their family's economic status and felt a deep sense of responsibility to support them. As a result, they had to generate income, contributing to their family's livelihood instead of pursuing education.

Additionally, they were obliged to social expectations that girls should prioritize family honor over personal aspiration. This cultural norm made them accept early marriage, further restricting them from educational opportunities. Participants even challenged the existing social norms. Sunita, for example, was determined to pursue an education and did everything to convince her father to educate her. Still, the patriarchal system ultimately proved stronger than her efforts. Robeyns (2003) describes how personal and social attributes influence converting resources into functioning in the capability approach. In the case of my participants, social attributes were strong in suppressing their desire for education. If they had access to education, these women could have acquired the recognition they valued in their respective fields.

After marriage, the new responsibilities of the family further discouraged them from continuing their education. They were engaged in fully managing their family, but in doing so, they also experienced capability deprivation due to their illiteracy. They felt embarrassed and had low self-confidence while dealing with the outside world. They recognized that their low education status was a reason for being restricted from social and professional participation. According to the capability approach, such social or economic barriers prevent the conversion of resources into functioning, resulting in restrictions on their opportunity to live the life they value. This finding aligns with the study of Dahal et al. (2021), which suggests that while boys return to school after marriage, girls often cannot continue their education due to additional responsibilities and family system constraints.

The study of Tagar et al. (2019) on women's education in Pakistan similarly found that communities often view girls' education as unnecessary, with cultural norms further hindering their access to education. In Nepal, Acharya et al. (2020)

found that female illiteracy depends on socio-demographic factors such as caste, religion, province, economic status, age group, and marital status. Dahal et al. (2021) also identified that unequal labor division, preference for sons, early marriage, and dowry system are reasons for school dropout among girls. It was crucial to understand the socio-economic background of my participants to know their stories closely and the long-term impacts of these factors on their lives. Understanding participants' attributes, including their family background and social structure, has helped to connect their past, present, and future and their role in their educational journey.

### **Challenges Faced by Women Due to Capability Deprivation**

After marriage, my research participants moved to Kathmandu, where they faced challenges in adapting to city life. The participants experienced trouble traveling, could not find suitable jobs, and depended on others for basic daily tasks because they had limited literacy skills. This situation of dependency made them feel embarrassed; harsh words from people questioning their capability made them feel disrespected. Without education, my participants could not exercise their freedom, an individual's agency to make choices, define goals, and achieve them (Sen, 1999).

According to the capability approach, freedom is the opportunity to choose a particular functioning, which was impossible for my participants as they were deprived of education. Because of their educational limitation, they could not achieve their functioning of being employed, confident, and the person they value. Similarly, as Sen (2005) described, social freedom is the social structure that enables individuals to exercise their freedom. In the case of my participants, the social structure was not favorable for them in making their choices; they were obliged to respect their family's decisions for their marriage and other life decisions. Thus, these restrictions and lack of freedom have affected their personal and social well-being. The feeling of low self-esteem and dependency ultimately discouraged them from practicing their social freedom of being engaged in the community and even in their children's school activities.

Pasang dreamt of leading her team by being a guide, while Radha and Sunita aspired to political leadership. However, their limited literacy skills prevented them from pursuing these ambitions. With Amartya's capability approach, my study presents illiteracy as a reason for their capability deprivation. That's why they could not get into the career of their choice, were deprived of respect, and could not lead

their life independently. In a nutshell, they could not achieve the well-being they might have had if they were literate.

As Katiyar (2022) mentioned, illiteracy hinders the community's development. Women with limited literacy skills often withdraw from social activities due to low self-esteem and confidence. In contrast, literacy provides the confidence and empowerment necessary to take control of one's life. My study's findings align with those of Mtika and Abbott (2023), demonstrating literacy's profound impact on well-being. Adults with limited education face challenges in employment, leadership roles, and restrictions on their independence.

The decision to return to school was not because of a single moment; it was the culmination of years of realizations that education was essential for their growth, better living, and freedom. Their challenges and realization ultimately drove them back to school to pursue better employment opportunities, leadership positions, and a dignified life. They returned to school to break the complexities of their lives, seek independence, and gain the freedom to live the lives they had always desired.

### **Role of NFE in Enhancing Women's Capability**

My research participants gradually learned to read and write. Over time, they began to notice significant changes in their lives. They could finally carry out the tasks they had long wished to perform, and they felt more valued and confident in public since they could read, write, understand, and express their opinions.

My study's findings align with those of Iniquez-Berrozpe et al. (2019), which highlighted the impact of NFE in instilling self-confidence in learners and increasing their access to employment opportunities. Similarly, my study resonates with the study conducted by Namooog and Agyekum (2024), which explores the effects of NFE on women's participation at the local level in Ghana's northern sector. The study presents that NFE equips women with income-generation skills, self-esteem, and respect. It also provides essential skills in political careers like lobbying, campaigning, and conflict management. As desired by the research participants, Sunita and Radha, for political life, these skills are essential for assembly members. Likewise, Babalola and Fasokun (2019) establish a relationship between women's literacy and participation in community development. Their study demonstrates that women in Southern Nigeria from adult literacy programs are twice as likely to participate in community development, decision-making processes, and social interaction as those who did not.

Two of my participants, Sunita and Radha, are preparing for the upcoming election and their newfound self-confidence results from participating in NFE. Sunita has improved her public speaking skills and showcased her abilities in securing positions in debate and poem recitation competitions. Like the participants in Namooog and Agyekum (2024), who gained the ability to participate in assembly, fund management, and engagement in policy decisions and discussions, Radha and Sunita are likely to leave a strong impression on their political careers.

Amartya Sen's Capability Approach offers an invaluable framework for understanding these changes. Sen emphasizes that development should be measured by the real freedoms people have to live the lives they value (Sen, 2009). In the past, participants' limited literacy skills led to capability deprivation, limiting their opportunities and growth. However, their recent involvement in education has expanded their capabilities and enabled them to pursue their aspirations. As they engage in learning, they enhance their capabilities, expand their capacity to make choices, improve their well-being, and achieve what they truly value. NFE is an integral part of the lifelong learning process, which aims to instill skills and knowledge that are necessary for professional growth and meeting the demands of modern life (Perin & Brcic, 2014).

My study highlights the instrumental role of NFE in enhancing women's capabilities and functioning. NFE empowers women to realize their potential and envision a future where they can continue to grow and gain the freedom to make choices that lead to dignified lives that they value (Sen, 2009). However, some studies suggest that literacy alone is insufficient for women's empowerment. For instance, Betts (2004), in her research on women in the Usulután community of El Salvador, opposes the idea that literacy equals power. She argues that women's struggles are not primarily due to illiteracy but are rooted in systemic issues such as limited resources and dominant societal forces. Similarly, Robinson-Pant (2000), in her study about Nepali women's literacy learning experiences, acknowledges that adult literacy classes equip women with basic reading and writing skills. However, she notes that while the agencies promote literacy as empowering, the opinion of staff on the ground often aligns with local beliefs that education primarily helps women perform their current roles efficiently rather than challenge gender norms or bring social changes. Further, she critiques literacy programs run by development agencies, noting that these classes deliver functional skills and impart a certain ideology of



literacy. In many cases, literacy classes are programmed to support the operational needs of organizations, such as women's groups, rather than the overall development of women.

Illich (1997) explains that formal education creates discrimination as it focuses on children and ignores the fact that individuals have different learning capacities throughout life. Similarly, certification reduces the value of learning and cannot meet the learners' needs. While accreditation is often necessary to receive certain educational and employment opportunities, learning is not always required to be meaningful or impactful. There should be a more flexible and inclusive way to recognize and validate NQF, learning across formal, non-formal, and informal systems. By implementing, the government can acknowledge the diverse skills gained by any learning mode- formal, non-formal, or informal.

Boyadjieva and Trichkova (2021) highlight that learning is a broader term that not only includes formal but also non-formal and informal modes of learning. Rather than focusing on structure and institution, learning encourages the active engagement of the learners. This feature belongs to the non-formal mode of learning that promotes lifelong learning and enables individuals to make their own choices regarding what they want to learn based on what they value.

On the other hand, NFE is no exception to challenges in terms of its existence, recognition, and approach. Robinson-Pant (2008) argues that NFE is often perceived as inferior to formal education. This perception suggests that NFE is only for women because men have access to schools with better resources. In addition, it is perceived that NFE facilitators are women because they have low pay and are part-time, so this position is suitable only for women. Further, the author explains that these perceptions have perpetuated the idea that women are subordinate to men and that they fit into NFE, which is inferior to formal education. NFE cannot provide quality education, and it lacks linkage in the formal sector job market, leading to high dropout rates and the spread of the message that women are incapable of learning.

Referencing the USAID report (2015), Latchem (2018) highlights the benefits of educating women. The report shows that better education for women results in economic growth, better well-being, and community development. For instance, increasing the number of girls attending school by 10% can increase a country's GDP by 3%. Similarly, when women occupy over 30% of the seats in political bodies, governance becomes more inclusive and democratic. These findings shed light on

how important it is for women to gain education opportunities, and NFE, being learner-centered, is well-suited to addressing the educational needs of women.

Furthermore, formal education often struggles to respond to the needs and demands of learners in a rapidly changing world. Singh (2015) argues it is crucial to recognize and acknowledge the outcome of non-formal learning, especially when empowering women and community development. While NFE has proven significant in instilling capabilities and enhancing women's functioning, it continues to receive lower priority than formal education. This contradiction exists even though NFE is recognized as essential to achieving the goals of EFA and the SDGs.

Adult learners bring their experiences into their learning environment, and their experiences are resources for learning. Effective learning occurs when adult learners realize they are receiving what they value and are relatable to their experiences. The learning environment must be engaging and participatory (Nepal Administrative Staff College [NASC], 2020). Principally, adult learning should be participatory, but I observed that the classes are conducted in a way that children are taught in school, which contradicts the concept of andragogy. Besides flexibility in the class timing, the learners have to follow the same discipline as children do in school, and even the textbooks of formal education are in use. Adult literacy programs are key to non-formal education, but these programs cannot integrate local knowledge and practices into their learning. These gaps in learning have impacted the development of problem-solving skills in the learners (NCE, 2021), and they lack the motivation to continue their learning. On the other hand, the writing of Preston (1999) views lifelong learning from a different perspective. With globalization, individuals are expected to constantly update their skills. The certificate is evidence of their upgrading and competency, which increases their likelihood of employment. The certification does not reflect the real learning of learners. Lifelong learning requires learners to continue learning, but this requirement has become stressful to individuals who cannot afford training, and they are at risk of being excluded from the job market.

From a theoretical perspective, my research explores how NFE expands women's capabilities, enabling them to lead the lives they value. NFE helps break the capability deprivation cycle by equipping women with literacy and essential skills. It empowers women to function independently, be socially active, and achieve leadership roles. The changes brought by NFE align with Sen's capability approach,

which centers on freedom and opportunities for individuals for their well-being. Thus, NFE is not only an alternative to formal education but also plays an essential role in promoting lifelong learning and helping in the development of individuals. Further, the study presents the significance of NFE in lifelong learning that has supported women in exercising the freedom to live the lives of their choice. Similarly, it enables women to become what they value and reinforces the idea that learning, whether formal or non-formal, is integral to personal and societal progress.

## CHAPTER VIII

### INSIGHTS, CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

I have dedicated this chapter to reflecting on my thesis writing journey, conclusion, and implications of my study. In this chapter, I have included my experience of conducting a research study, which began right after I joined the university for my MPhil degree. In addition, this chapter is about what I have learned while conducting research. Along with my insights, this chapter includes the conclusion and implications of my study.

#### **Insights**

Almost two years of research took different phases, and when I reflect, I see that it was a learning journey. Amidst confusion in selecting the topic for the study, the daily experiences and narratives shared by female family members motivated me to conduct this research. Writing has not been easy for me; I occasionally stopped for months and struggled to get to the point where I stopped. During those struggles, the memories of my grandmother and the support of my family pushed me to continue my work. In addition, the consultation with my supervisor helped me to keep working on it. I often wished that I could have probed my grandmother more for her stories and insights about learning. This thought also always inspired me to complete my work so that the stories of these women represent the experiences of other grandmothers and mothers.

Initially, I began exploring the literature on adult learners and later connected their learning with lifelong learning and non-formal education. At first, the concept of non-formal learning was somewhat confusing and vague, so I read related articles and other resources to deepen my understanding. I further visited CEHRD and interacted with the NFE expert and professional. These interactions also helped me clarify the concept of NFE and lifelong learning in Nepal, its practices, and NQF. Throughout my research journey, I visited adult learners' schools. I talked with their principals, which helped me understand their functions and challenges. Therefore, the research journey became a valuable learning experience for me. I learned about the research process and gained insight into non-formal education and its application in the context of Nepal as lifelong learning. I explored different learning perspectives from the stories of women I interviewed. Academically, the stories of women were data for

my study; on the other hand, their life experiences are an inspiration to all women who are in search of their identity and achieve the dream they are aspiring to live.

### **Conclusion**

There is lower participation of women compared to men in education, where only 63.4% of women in the age group 15 and above have language and mathematical literacy skills (NCE, 2021). The education status of women demands the intervention of lifelong learning through NFE in Nepal to improve women's access to education. In addition, lifelong learning helps women to enhance their skills and knowledge to fit the labor market. NFE plays a crucial role, particularly in developing countries like Nepal, where there is a significant disparity in access to education. NFE aims to address the shortcomings of formal education, which is often inaccessible to certain communities and fails to provide the skills needed for holistic development (Almeida & Morais, 2024). Without NFE, it seems impossible to implement a lifelong learning strategy, as the disparity in education access is a concern, especially in countries with poor formal education systems. Women with low educational levels face a double risk of exclusion, making NFE a crucial element in enabling them to participate in social, political, and cultural life actively.

In my study, my participants experienced social restrictions in attending school, and their families' economic backgrounds also did not support their education. They married at a young age and were busy living the life of mother and daughter-in-law, playing different roles as women. They faced difficulties and complexity while dealing with regular life activities because they could not read or write. They were not able to perform the activity they were passionate about.

Amartya Sen's capability approach has been instrumental in explaining how social restrictions result in capability deprivation, which participants have experienced in their lives. They could not achieve the opportunities associated with leadership, mobility, employment, and political representation, among many others. They had a deep realization of the inability to exercise these freedoms or opportunities because of their educational status. As a result, they returned to school later in life to overcome these educational barriers. They strived to achieve education so they could read their favorite storybooks, engage in creative works, and understand social issues. Now, they can read and write, and they consider these abilities to have provided freedom. They can now freely travel, do banking work independently, and make the meaning of every sentence of the stories they read. The women who have limited themselves to

household work now aspire to make changes in society and help other women explore their potential.

This study also challenges the notion that learning must occur within formal schools and be validated through formal structures to be meaningful. Learning can happen anytime and anywhere, and the learning mode can be formal, informal, or non-formal. These modes of learning complement each other. The findings of this study, supported by the literature and my own experiences, affirm that learning is a lifelong process. It is essential for expanding our capabilities and enhancing our ability to function meaningfully in various aspects of life. In addition, formal learning is limited to young people, while non-formal learning is inclusive and integral for lifelong learning.

### **Implication**

This study helps individuals understand the importance of lifelong learning in women's lives. The experiences of women in my study are inspiring for all those women who intend to study but cannot join the school because they do not feel comfortable or for other personal reasons. Their stories are strong enough to establish that learning is a lifelong process, and age does not restrict individuals from pursuing it. The study's findings will help promote non-formal education and influence educators and concerned organizations to address existing gaps in delivering quality education, as well as the capacity of facilitators and resources to achieve the goal of lifelong learning through NFE. Similarly, my study's findings help connect education with individuals' capability and functioning. NFE helps women achieve their right to education, which is guaranteed by Nepal's constitution, but NFE has not received recognition and validation; thus, learners are at risk of dropping out of their studies.

On the other hand, the facilitators work for low wages, and schools function with limited resources. I discovered this situation when I visited schools and interacted with the facilitators and principals. Despite schools' responsibility to promote lifelong learning, they struggle to operate within the limited government budget. Thus, I find my study helps to draw the government's attention to developing programs and policies to support NFE and make necessary arrangements for the quick execution of the national qualification framework. Further, the study findings open other potential research areas, such as how NFE is being practiced in Nepal and how adult learning can be improved. Other research areas could be the perspective of adult

learners about education and their connection with social well-being and other aspects.

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