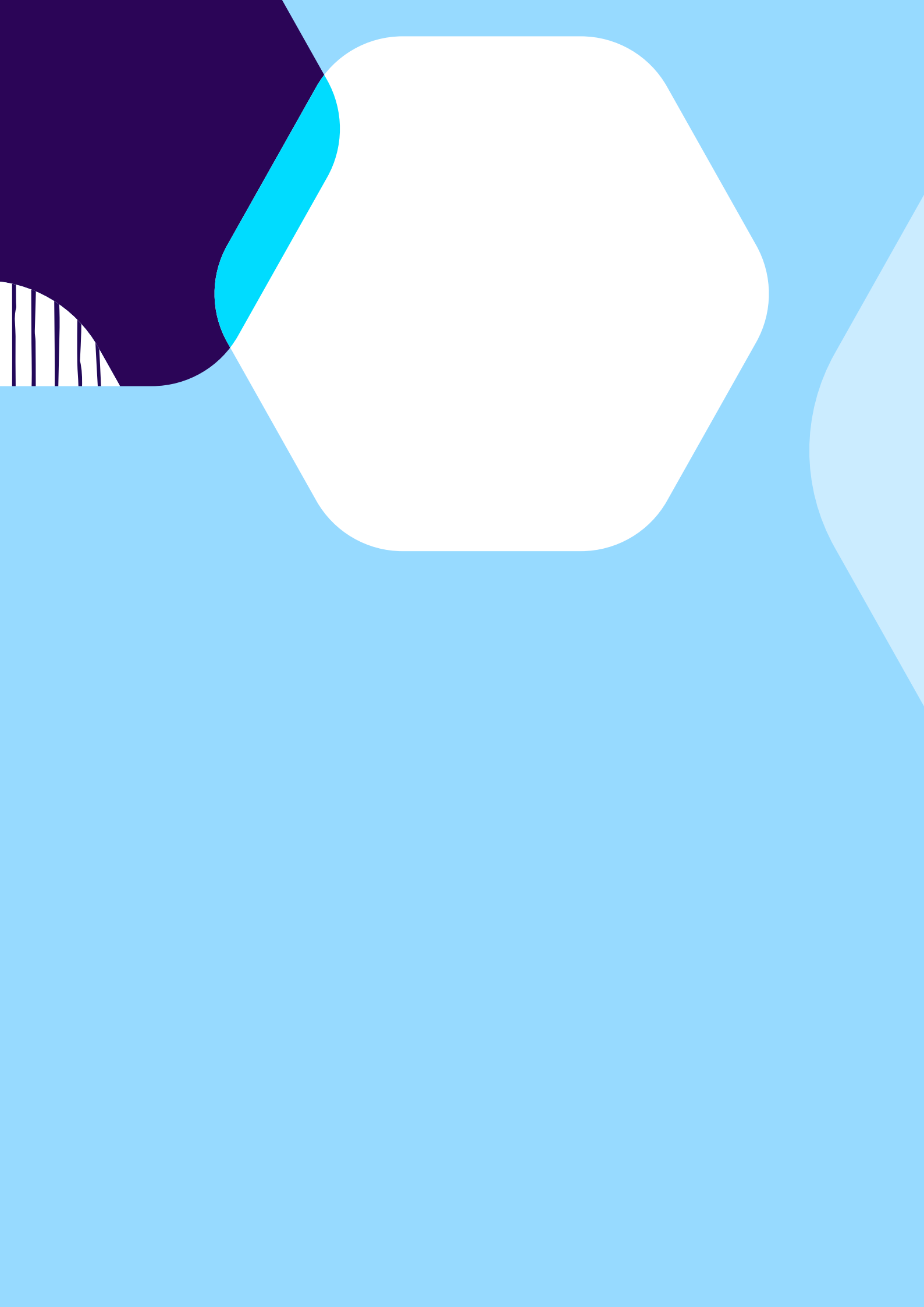


# English-medium education in low- and middle-income contexts: Enabler or barrier to gender equality?

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# Contents

<b>Executive summary</b>	<b>04</b>
Gender equality and English-medium education	04
Key findings	04
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>07</b>
<b>Gender and English-medium education</b>	<b>08</b>
An urgent research topic	08
Existing evidence	10
<b>Approach</b>	<b>16</b>
‘Gender’ and ‘language’	16
Methodology	17
Questionnaires: Data collection and analysis	19
Interviews: Data collection and analysis	21
Classroom observations	23
Diaries	24
<b>Nepal case study</b>	<b>25</b>
Nepal	25
Birgunj, Madhesh	26
Shree Durga Vawani Secondary School	26
Questionnaire findings	28
Interview findings	34
Classroom observations	42
<b>Nigeria case study</b>	<b>46</b>
Nigeria	46
Kano City, Kano State	47
Constitution Day Secondary School and Madina Secondary School	47
Questionnaire findings	48
Interview findings	54
Classroom observations	66
<b>Discussion</b>	<b>69</b>
Limitations and further research	72
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>74</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>75</b>

# Executive summary

## Gender equality and English-medium education

Empowering girls and enhancing their educational opportunities is a longstanding policy priority and part of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, there has been little consideration of how the global push for English-medium education (EME) in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) impacts on the attainment of these goals. Although EME is widely regarded as offering opportunities and improving life chances, it is also known to create difficulties in understanding subject content, and in some LMICs it is associated with a colonial past. The extent to which EME affects specifically girls' opportunities to access and participate in good quality education is not well understood.

This report assesses the extent to which the rapid rise of EME in LMICs affects girls' educational participation, and if some girls are affected more than others. Drawing on in-depth research in three government secondary schools (L3 in the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCE)) (UNESCO, 2012) in Nepal and Nigeria, the report brings to

the fore the voices and practices of those directly involved in and affected by EME: students, parents, teachers and policymakers. The research tackled the overarching aim of assessing whether EME serves as an enabler or a barrier to gender equality in LMICs by addressing three research questions:

How does EME mediate educational access and participation for girls in LMICs?

To what extent does EME impact on learning for girls in LMICs?

To what extent does EME disadvantage girls, and are any girls at particular risk?

This report offers some findings and should be read in conjunction with a separate policy brief, available at [www.teachingenglish.org.uk/publications/case-studies-insights-and-research](http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/publications/case-studies-insights-and-research) that offers recommendations for policy, practice and future research in the area.

## Key findings

EME acts as a gender divider. Although significant progress has been made towards the SDG of getting girls into school in LMICs, the rapid rise of EME risks impeding the

progress made. In surveyed schools in Nepal and Nigeria, girls are underrepresented in EME, with a ratio of one girl to every three boys. In the English-medium stream in a Nepali school, 31 per cent are girls and 69 per cent are boys, with the gender distribution being more equal in the Nepali-medium stream at 53 per cent girls and 47 per cent boys (N=108, L3 ISCE). In Nigeria, an English-medium school has 33 per cent girls and 67 per cent boys, whereas again in a Hausa-medium school, it is somewhat more equal with 42 per cent girls and 58 per cent boys (N=916, L3 ISCE).

A combination of economic and sociocultural factors explains girls' comparatively lower participation in EME. In Nepal, tuition fees in the English-medium stream can deter some parents from sending their daughters to EME, particularly those from lower socio-economic classes and minoritised communities. As more resources are invested into the English-medium stream, it creates an environment that is more conducive to learning, benefiting students who are already advantaged while perpetuating disadvantage for those students who don't have access, the majority of which are girls from poorer families.

Early marriage is another key factor in explaining girls' underrepresentation in EME at secondary school level in both Nepal and Nigeria. As many teenage girls drop out of school to get married, there is a perception that they don't need English. The dowry custom in some regions in Nepal can further disincentivise some poorer families from sending their daughters to the more costly and prestigious English-medium stream, because a better educated girl can incur a higher bride dowry.

Perceptions that 'girls don't need English' also relate to sociocultural norms about the roles girls and boys are expected to play in society when they leave school. English is perceived as offering educational and professional opportunities that are appropriate and useful

for boys, whereas it is seen as less suitable and useful for those girls who either discontinue their education to get married and look after the home, or who take up jobs in the public sector.

The underrepresentation of girls in EME coheres with previous research documenting an underrepresentation of girls in private education. Indeed, there is a conflation of English-medium and private education, despite English-medium also being prevalent in government schools. Many participants use EME as a shorthand for private – 'superior quality' – education. However, EME is not intrinsically superior to national-medium education since good quality education cannot be considered separately from non-language-related factors, notably investment in educational resources and infrastructures, and socio-economic factors.

EME creates a Matthew effect – the principle of wealth accumulation whereby the rich get richer and the poor get poorer – in that it perpetuates gender- and class-based educational inequalities. Lack of access to EME limits poorer and minoritised girls' exposure to English and their opportunities to practise, while also restricting their onward opportunities since English is often essential for further education and well-paid jobs.

Boys and girls in both Nepal and Nigeria view EME as the more challenging, but also the more rewarding option and an overwhelming majority of students have a preference for being taught in English. Although many students report difficulties understanding the content through English, some also report challenges understanding in a national language, e.g. Nepali in Nepal and Hausa in Nigeria, because they can speak a different language at home. For this reason, policy decisions about language of education are never easy to make and difficult to implement in multilingual societies.

EME is to some extent a misnomer as it does not correspond to classroom practice, in which translanguaging, i.e. the drawing on resources from multiple languages, frequently happens. Although the use of languages other than English tends to be discouraged by school leaders and teachers, it can serve to assist learning and mitigate challenges for girls and boys. Teachers have typically received no guidelines regarding the use of different languages and little or no pedagogic training in general.

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Data curation								✓		✓		
Formal analysis		✓		✓	✓							
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# Gender and English-medium education

## An urgent research topic

Getting girls into education in LMICs is a longstanding policy priority – and with good reason. Although some progress has been made, there continue to be more out-of-school girls than out-of-school boys in some of the poorest countries in the world. In countries designated as ‘low-income’<sup>1</sup>, 35.3 per cent of girls compared to 29.5 per cent of boys are out of school across primary and secondary education (UNESCO, 2019). Gender disparities in educational participation tend to gradually decrease the wealthier a country is. Thus, in the comparatively wealthier ‘lower-middle-income countries’ – the focus of this report – gender gaps decrease, with only slightly more girls than boys being out of school (21.8 per cent of girls compared to 20.4 per cent of boys). The gender pattern then reverses in even wealthier countries, with more boys than girls being out of school – 8.9 per cent of boys compared to 7.6 per cent of girls in ‘upper-middle-income’ countries and 3.6 per cent of boys compared to 3.4 per cent of girls in ‘high-income’ countries (UNESCO, 2019). Getting girls into education in LMICs is thus seen as a key way of lifting some of the poorest countries out of poverty (World Bank Group, 2015; UNESCO, 2017). There is also a moral imperative to ensure a fair, just and gender-equitable world.

It is important to note, however, that the global figures cited above obscure considerable variation in girls’ educational participation across regional and national contexts and across educational levels. Zooming in on the regions in which the two focal countries of this report, Nepal and Nigeria, are located, South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, there are extensive differences in girls’ educational participation. In Sub-Saharan Africa, 33.6 per cent of girls compared to 28.9 per cent of boys are out of school across all levels of education. In South Asia, however, out-of-school girls are fewer and the gender gap is less pronounced, with 22.1 per cent of out-of-school girls compared to 20.9 per cent of out-of-school boys across all levels of education. Additionally, whereas in Sub-Saharan Africa, out-of-school girls outnumber out-of-school boys consistently across primary, lower secondary and upper secondary school, South Asia has greater variability across educational levels. At primary and lower secondary level, girls have caught up with boys in educational participation, and there are now more out-of-school boys than girls at both levels. This pattern reverses at upper secondary level, where out-of-school girls (47.1 per cent) again outnumber out-of-school boys (44.1 per cent) (UNESCO, 2019). This suggests that secondary level can be a crucial point at which girls drop out, at least in

1. The World Bank assigns countries to four groups, depending on their gross national income (GNI) per capita: ‘low-’, ‘lower-middle’, ‘upper-middle’ and ‘high-’ income countries (World Bank, 2023).



“

**At primary and lower secondary level, girls have caught up with boys in educational participation...**



South Asia, which is why this report takes aim at the secondary level of education.

The reasons for the greater number of out-of-school girls than boys at upper secondary level in both Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia are complex and variable across contexts. Some of the reasons why girls drop out of education at secondary level include early marriage, teen pregnancy, school-related violence, lack of investment in girls' education, and sociocultural norms about girls' abilities and women's societal roles (McCleary-Sills et al., 2015; Sekine & Hodgkin, 2017; King & Winthrop, 2015; Tao, 2018; UNICEF/UNFPA, 2017; Karki & Mix, 2022; Khanal, 2018). However, one factor that has only rarely been addressed in relation to girls' educational participation in LMICs is the rapid increase in EME<sup>2</sup>. When students are required to learn in a language that differs from their home language, it is widely assumed to lead to difficulties in comprehension and engagement in the classroom (Erling et al., 2017; Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 2023). In some cases, EME is also associated with economic and social opportunities both at the national and individual level (Erling & Seargeant, 2013). The rapid rise of EME across LMICs thus potentially acts as both a barrier to and enabler of girls' educational equality. The research reported here sets out to address the overarching question of the extent to which EME creates barriers or opportunities for girls' educational participation, and if so, which girls are most and least able to take advantage of the opportunities. It provides evidence that EME risks impeding the progress made by creating class- and gender-based educational inequalities, and restricting opportunities for the most disadvantaged girls. It calls for urgent further research and for governments across LMICs to intervene to ensure that EME does not impede progress made in providing equitable education for all girls. Let's consider first of all existing evidence on EME and gender equality.

## Existing evidence

A review of existing evidence in relation to EME and gender equality follows below. The section starts with a review of EME and inequalities before moving on to the more specific area of EME and gender inequalities.

### EME and inequalities

EME has long been an issue of contention in many LMICs, while in others, it's a more recent arrival. English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI), as it is also referred to, has been defined as 'the use of the English language to teach academic subjects (other than English itself) in countries or jurisdictions where the first language (L1) of the majority of the population is not English' (Dearden, 2014, p. 4; Macaro, 2018, p. 19). This definition aligns with both contexts in focus in this study, Nepal and Nigeria; although in Sub-Saharan Africa, medium of education is more often discussed under the term Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) (Nel & Ssentanda, 2023). The history of English in Nepal and Nigeria differs but there are also parallels in more modern times. In Nigeria, a country previously colonised by Britain, the history of EME is as long as formal education itself (Nel & Ssentanda, 2023). Formal education was introduced by missionaries, the administration of which was later taken over by colonisers (Nel & Ssentanda, 2023). Unlike in the French and Portuguese colonies, where French and Portuguese were the only languages of instruction, in Nigeria and other British colonies, African languages were used in education at least for the first three to five years of schooling (Read, 1953), sowing the seeds for modern day 'mother-tongue based multilingual education' (MTB-MLE) policies, which provide for the earliest years of schooling to be in a child's mother tongue. Nonetheless, the use of African languages in education was restricted: the colonisers mostly

2. See, however, Milligan & Adamson, 2022; Uworwabayeho et al., 2021; Carter et al., 2020 for research in Africa, and Upadhaya & Sah, 2019 for Nepal.



kept them to Bible translations, dictionary writing, sketch grammatical descriptions and for learning to read and write (Bamgbose, 1999; Ssentanda & Norton, 2022).

In Nepal, a country without British colonial history, EME has so far had a more restricted presence. Recently, however, it has seen a massive expansion, having hitched a 'free ride' on the back of global capitalism (O'Regan, 2021). As in many countries in South Asia, EME in Nepal is primarily driven by neoliberal policies that have opened up for private educational providers to offer in-demand EME schools (Padwad et al., 2023). To compete with the private sector, and meet parental demand for EME, which is seen as offering 'better' education, government schools in Nepal have also increasingly begun to offer EME (Padwad et al., 2023; Poudel & Choi, 2021). The EME model of the private school sector has thus become 'a hegemonic ideology in educational policy reforms', with public schools coming to be seen as deficient and ineffective if they use Nepali as the medium of education (Padwad et al., 2023, p. 198). In recent years, Nigeria too is witnessing a resurgence and further entrenchment of English through an expanding market for private education, where schools often teach in English<sup>3</sup>. Lagos, the largest city and former capital of Nigeria, was home in 2013 to 12,098 private schools catering to 57 per cent of the state's enrolled children (Härmä, 2013). An earlier survey from 2005 found that in poor areas of Lagos State, 71 per cent of all schools

were found to be private with 75 per cent of children being enrolled in private schools (Tooley et al., 2005). Although there are many reasons why parents prefer private schools, often it is because government schools are perceived to be failing or are too far from home (Härmä, 2013; Adebayo, 2009).

The inextricability of English with colonialism and neoliberalism has given rise to a sizeable body of literature on the inequalities engendered by EME. EME in Nepal is argued to create epistemic inequalities, social stratification, linguistic injustice and to threaten democracy (Phyak & Sah, 2022; Sah, 2022a, 2022b; Phyak, 2021; Sah & Karki, 2020). Such work, which builds on the influential scholarship of 'linguistic imperialism' and 'linguistic human rights' (Phillipson, 1992; Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 1994), recognises the 'coloniality of language' (Veronelli, 2015) – an understanding of language inherited from the colonial project. While the negative aspects of English are clear, there are also benefits to using English, such as improving language skills and enhancing personal, professional and life opportunities (Erling et al., 2021; Erling et al., 2017; Erling & Seargeant, 2013). In addition to issues concerning social and epistemic justice, there are also more practical challenges in EME, such as how to engage in effective teaching and learning when both teachers' and learners' English proficiencies are limited (Phyak, 2016). In Nigeria, insufficient English proficiency has been argued to pose communication

3. Even government schools also frequently teach in English despite the prevailing policy to teach in the first few years through a home language, with English being used from as early as pre-primary, nursery level (Ohiri-Aniche 2016).

challenges in teaching, learning, reading and writing, but proficiency levels vary extensively across demographic groups and in different parts of the country (Adebayo & Folorunsho, 2017; Ola-Busari, 2014; Omowumi, 2019; Trudell, 2017). There is a good evidence base to suggest that children acquire literacy most efficiently in the language they know best, and that using children's home language in early schooling is critical for cognitive development (Cummins, 2000; Kosonen, 2005). Such evidence underpins international policies to promote 'mother tongue education' or MTB-MLE (Bühmann & Trudell, 2008; UNESCO, 1953, 2003; World Bank, 2021; Trudell, 2016; Trudell, 2023). However, the case for MTB-MLE is less well-evidenced at the later stages of education where literacy development is for most children further advanced, which is one reason why this research focuses on secondary level. At secondary level, there is arguably a greater need for languages with wider reach to prepare students for further education or post-education employment. This is also often reflected in national level MTB-MLE policies, including those in Nigeria and Nepal, where there is provision post-primary level for teaching in languages other than a regional or national language, including in English.

However, although many LMICs, including Nepal and Nigeria, emulate the international MTB-MLE recommendation at national policy level, in reality, it can be very difficult to implement in multilingual contexts. This is because of the sheer number of languages brought to classrooms, combined with a shortage of teachers who speak the languages, and a lack of teaching material and sometimes even codification of those languages (Erling et al., 2017; Ibrahim & Gwandu, 2016). Another challenge is defining what exactly MTB-MLE means, and schools and teachers tend to interpret and implement it in very different ways (Poudel & Costley, 2023): does it mean using multiple languages to assist teaching, or

does it mean primarily using the mother tongue for instruction while teaching other languages as subjects, or does it mean providing textbooks in one language and mediating the content through another? And how do languages that are not codified feature in all this? There are endless implementation possibilities. Moreover, the very concept of MTE-MLE policy itself has been criticised for being predicated on western paradigms of what a 'language' is and ought to be, which ends up reproducing the very inequalities the concept sets out to challenge (van Pinxteren, 2022). Concepts like 'mother tongue', 'L1', 'home language', on which MTB-MLE are premised, are themselves colonial constructs<sup>4</sup>, upheld by western scholars writing from the perspective of strong, mature nation states with well-established educational systems and mostly monolingual societies. Languages conceptualised as discrete and nameable entities does not often correspond to the fluid ways in which languages are used in many LMICs, where multilingualism is the unmarked, mundane and inconspicuous norm (Ssentanda & Norton, 2022). A local going to the market in Mumbai, India, is likely to have discussions that naturally translanguage between an assemblage of Marathi, Gujarati, Hindi, Urdu and English, irrespective of the seller's and customer's 'mother tongue(s)', 'L1' or 'home language', and often speakers will not even realise they are doing this<sup>5</sup>. As Brock-Utne points out in regard to Africa: 'western paradigms are used when researching language policy in Africa [...] which do not fit the African situation' (Brock-Utne, 2010, p. 641). Concepts such as 'early' and 'late exit', furthermore, which are sometimes invoked for policies in LMICs, derive from US bilingual immersion programmes mostly aimed at Latino speakers in mainstream US education, and thus may not be easily extrapolatable to contexts where daily usage of a multitude of languages in and outside of education is the ubiquitous norm. Rather than making unimplementable

4. We credit this point to Rustom Mody (personal comment).

5. We credit this point to Rustom Mody (personal comment).

recommendations about language use, then, this research seeks to expose and address issues in the political economy that underpin the rise of EME in LMICs and perpetuate inequalities, notably the privatisation of education.

## EME and gender inequalities

Despite much or most research on language-in-education being premised on intents to challenge inequalities, there is still a scarcity of research on inequality in relation to gender, specifically how girls in LMICs are impacted by EME<sup>6</sup>. A review of the literature undertaken as part of this research (see further under Methodology) distinguishes inequalities at the individual and the societal level. These will be discussed in turn below, although in reality they overlap, with societal norms often being internalised, and internalised dispositions manifesting and reproducing themselves in societal norms.

At a societal level, a synthesis of the literature suggests that girls in LMICs can be comparatively more negatively impacted by EME than girls elsewhere because of the more demarcated roles of boys and girls in poorer countries. Additionally, girls who are already disadvantaged are likely to be further disadvantaged by EME, imposing on them a 'double disadvantage' (Milligan & Adamson, 2022). Although the specific nature of disadvantage will depend, it can relate to ethnicity, religion, skin colour, rural versus urban location, and class-based inequality. One study in India found that girls belonging to a minority tribe had lower literacy rates compared with the national average for girls, with implications for their ability to access multilingual education, thus further disadvantaging them (Sachdeva, 2015). Sociocultural norms about girls' and boys' roles in society can also influence family choices about education, indirectly impacting on

language learning opportunities. For instance, with around 37 per cent of girls in Nepal marrying before the age of 18 and 10 per cent before the age of 15, parents are often disincentivised to invest in their daughter's education as she will belong to her husband's family after marriage (Upadhaya & Sah, 2019). Insofar as this deprives girls of EME, it also impacts on their language learning and future educational and professional prospects. The issue of early marriage is compounded by the tradition to pay a dowry, mostly present in the Terai region. A dowry is a price paid to the groom's family upon marriage. In the Terai region, for example, parents are more likely to marry their daughters off at a young age to avoid a higher dowry price, restricting access to English language learning for girls of this community (Upadhaya & Sah, 2019). Girls' 'double disadvantage' (Milligan & Adamson, 2022) in Nepal is further complicated by caste and ethnicity with Brahmin, Chhetri and Newari girls tending to rank at the top and Dalit, Muslim, Madheshi and poor girls tending to be at the lowest end of educational access indicators (Upadhaya & Sah, 2019). Recent research in Africa reveals that some girls face an additional burden of having to learn through an unfamiliar language, particularly as they reach adolescence, at which time they start to carry greater responsibilities, what has been described as 'an "intersection" of language and other burdens' and as a 'double-disadvantage' (Milligan & Adamson, 2022, p. 10). In some societies, girls are expected to take care of their home and family from a young age, whether they remain in their birth family or are married into another (Asfaw, 2012; Jere et al., 2015; Sachdeva, 2015; Uworwabayeho et al., 2021). The expectation in some countries, for example Cambodia, that women are responsible for transmitting their language and culture onto their children, and likely to receive lower wages, can also impact on educational choices around medium of education (Ball & Smith, 2019).

6. See, however, Milligan & Adamson, 2022; Uworwabayeho et al., 2021; Carter et al., 2020 for research in Africa, and Upadhaya & Sah, 2019 for Nepal.

Moreover, the privatisation of education leads to class-based inequality, which impacts particularly on girls from poorer families. Where EME is associated with a financial cost, girls can be deselected for access to EME given parents' lesser investment in their daughters' than their sons' education (Barua, 2019; Narwana, 2019; Sahni & Shankar, 2012; Khanal, 2018). As a result, some girls may not advance to tertiary education and those who do can experience a restricted choice of subjects, as many courses at tertiary level are only offered in EME. This in turn impacts on these girls' earning potential, which in turn reinforces and perpetuates gendered societal divisions (Narwana, 2019). In Nepal, enrolment rates in private versus public schools are clearly gender-differentiated, with parents considerably more likely to invest in their sons' than their daughters' education, which manifests itself in a proportionately higher enrolment rate of boys in private schools, which are often English-medium, across all age groups (Upadhaya & Sah, 2019; Khanal, 2018; CEHRD, 2020). Private (EME) schools are generally perceived to offer superior-quality education and access to a wider range of professional opportunities (Padwad et al., 2023). The 'incidental' learning of English that can take place in EME, although certainly not pre-determined and likely to vary significantly across learners, can offer additional benefits. In India too, girls from lower-income families are less likely to be able to access EME at primary and secondary level than either their brothers or wealthier girls, which can restrict their onward educational prospects, including access to STEM subjects at tertiary level, which are mostly taught in English (Narwana, 2019; Sahni & Shankar, 2012). Food insecurity is another class-based inequality affecting educational choices in some countries. Poorer families in Nepal with insufficient food are more likely to marry their daughters at a young age to lighten the financial burden, disrupting their educational trajectory and potential for language learning,

with further consequences for onward possibilities. Thus, the review shows that the 'double disadvantage' (Milligan & Adamson, 2022) faced by girls of certain communities warrants further examination, the task of this research.

At an individual level, some studies have found that girls' confidence in speaking a language they are learning tends to be lower than boys' (Jabali, 2022; Kuchah et al., 2023; Macaro & Akincioglu, 2018; Norton, 2014; Jones & Seilhamer, 2022), potentially impacting on the opportunities they get for practising their English speaking skills. Although studies showing lesser confidence among girls are not surprising given girls' generally lower status in society, the finding is not universal, and some studies show males exhibiting higher levels of anxiety, which underscores the importance of not essentialising gender, but considering it in relation to other factors (Özer & Yetkin, 2022; Alaofi & Russell, 2022). Some studies have considered gender differences in language learning motivation (Calafato & Tang, 2019; Soh et al., 2021; van Wyk & Mostert, 2016; Oga-Baldwin & Fryer, 2020), but it is unclear how any such differences would translate into an EME environment where the learning of English has been said to be more implicit than explicit (Lasagabaster, 2016). Opportunities to practise languages outside of the educational context were noted as important across the literature. Several studies noted that in societies with clearly demarcated gender roles, boys had more opportunities to practise English informally than their female peers, due to either practical societal restrictions or behavioural expectations placed upon girls (Jabali, 2022). In some countries, there are gender differences in the languages children are familiar with when they enter school, dependent on gendered roles within the society (Barua, 2019; Crawford & Marin, 2021). In others, wider societal expectations of appropriate gendered behaviour can affect whether students and teachers believe it is appropriate for girls and

boys to express themselves in English within the classroom, which can negatively impact both boys and girls (Baine & Mwamwenda, 1994; Humphreys, 2013; Uworwabayeho et al., 2021; Palfreyman, 2005; Hudson, 2012). All in all, the literature review underscores that factors at the individual and societal level interact to create disadvantages for girls, as well as a need for further research into the complex ways in which language of education mediates this.

## Research questions

The research addresses three overarching questions:

1. How does EME mediate educational access and participation for girls in LMICs?
2. To what extent does EME impact on learning for girls in LMICs?
3. To what extent does EME disadvantage girls, and are any girls at particular risk?



# Approach

## ‘Gender’ and ‘language’

This section outlines our approach to ‘gender’ and ‘language’, the two main constructs in this research. The term ‘gender’ is usually taken to refer to a sociocultural construct where ‘sex’ refers to a biological category. ‘Gender’ is also often used as a ‘polite’ alternative to ‘sex’ (Cameron, 2012) to refer to the biological categories, ‘male’ and ‘female’. In this report, we use ‘gender’, occasionally interchangeably with ‘sex’, but we should make clear that we are thereby glossing over any intersex individuals due to a dearth of data and research. In terms of theoretical assumptions, we take as given that there are profound, systemic and structural gender inequalities at the global level that impact differentially on girls’ and boys’ opportunities. We further assume that these gender inequalities can be either exacerbated or reduced by EME. In particular, we are attuned to the political economy and how issues such as privatisation of education impacts on EME and girls’ opportunities. We thus recognise that although education – and by extension EME – can be a vital tool for female empowerment (Manion, 2017), girls’ educational access, opportunities and participation are often impeded by very real phenomena of poverty, domestic burden, marriage, childbearing, gender-based violence and gendered cultural norms and expectations<sup>7</sup>. At the same time, we are also mindful that ‘girls’ is not a homogenous group. To account for this, we adopt an intersectional approach to gender (GADN, 2017), which means

that we expect girls’ challenges and opportunities to vary significantly depending on their ethnicity, religion, socio-economic background and so on, and that this variation must be studied empirically.

In terms of ‘language’, we find it necessary to distinguish between language as a ‘politico-ideological construct’ and language as ‘communicative practice’. Recent sociolinguistic scholarship emphasises communicative practice, where the demarcation of different ‘named’ languages matters less. In multilingual societies, people move in and out between different languages all the time, often without even being aware of it, and communicative practices are much more hybrid and fluid than suggested by the artificial language boundaries imposed through colonialism and nationalism (Canagarajah & Ashraf, 2013; Pennycook & Makoni, 2019). Rampton proposes: ‘Instead of seeing multilingualism as a plurality of “named languages”, [...] we should approach it as a repertoire of styles and linguistic resources, tuned to particular communicative settings and spheres of life’ (Rampton, 2019, p. 1).

Translanguaging – the mixing of resources (accent, lexis and style) from different ‘named’ languages – is increasingly gaining ground in sociolinguistic scholarship (García & Li, 2014). Notwithstanding this ‘disinvention and reconstitution’ of languages in sociolinguistics (Makoni & Pennycook, 2006), we recognise that named ‘languages’ continue to serve important politico-economic functions. Educational policymakers and practitioners, as well as

7. See review in Manion, 2017; Unterhalter et al., 2014; Lombardozzi, 2020, 2021.



people in general, still tend to think of languages as ‘nameable’ entities that are associated with different opportunities. This is perhaps particularly the case in educational domains where standards, language ideologies and norms about ‘correctness’ often have to be made explicit, and where acquisition of standard norms is perceived to offer capital and opportunities. The reason why we believe it is important to distinguish between languages as communicative practice and languages as politico-economic constructs is that it enables us to move beyond simple understandings of whether EME is good or bad. In their communicative practices, we can see that students and teachers make English work for them, often by engaging in translanguaging, and irrespective of established proficiency levels. At the same time, we can see that policymakers make recommendations and people in general make educational choices about certain languages, and this means that languages as politico-ideological constructs continue to serve important symbolic functions.

## Methodology

Aligned with our theoretical approach, our methodology sought to uncover how girls of different communities and social demographics are impacted by EME. We adopted a multi-pronged approach to this end:

### A review of the literature

Given the scarcity of research on girls and EME, a systematic literature review was conducted to survey existing evidence. To identify all relevant literature, a multi-faceted search strategy was used, in which academic databases and grey literature were searched, followed by handsearching of the several identified important texts. This approach identified 55 texts (academic papers, policy briefings and project evaluations) on the topic of gender and

EME at all levels of education and with global scope. Narrative synthesis was then applied to identify common themes.

### Contrastive case studies

Nepal and Nigeria offer contrasting cases of the rise of EME. Where EME in Nigeria is entrenched in colonial history and as old as formal education itself, in Nepal, EME has seen a massive expansion more recently as a phenomenon embedded in neoliberalism. This contrast yields insights into the impact of politico-economic factors on girls’ access to EME.

### Comparative research design

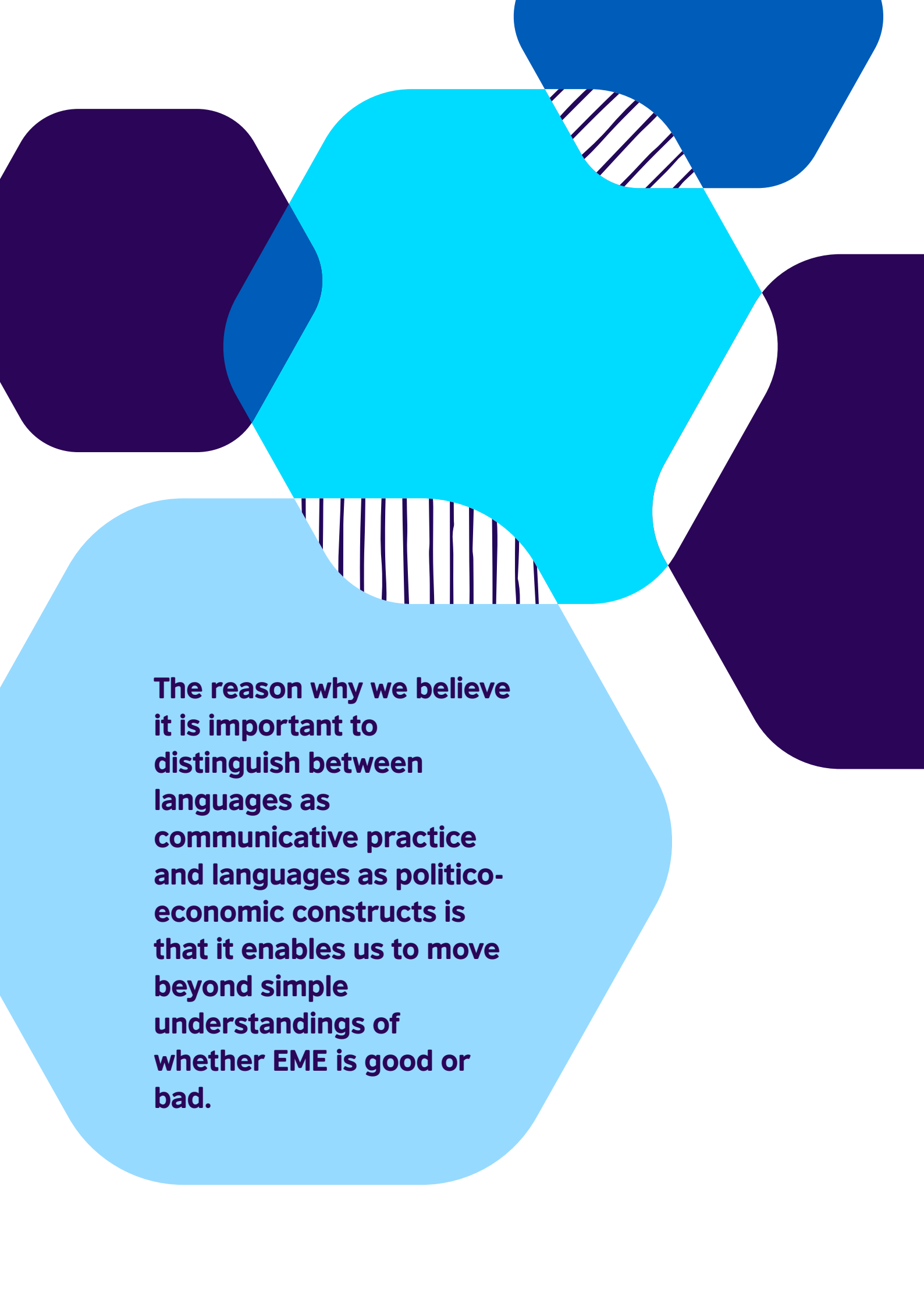
In each country, we targeted one EME and one national-medium school respectively to gain insights into gender differential access and participation in each type of school. In Nigeria, we gained access to two different schools: one English-medium and one Hausa-medium; in Nepal, we gained access to one dual-medium school, with one English-medium and one Nepali-medium stream. The fact that data was collected from two schools in Nigeria and one in Nepal should be borne in mind when reading the report. All three schools are government schools.

### Focus on secondary level

We chose to focus on secondary school level as this is often the crucial point at which girls drop out, because of early marriage or lack of investment in their education. Students in both countries were in the 13–16 age group (L3 in the ISCE).

### In-depth fieldwork

In each school, we carried out in-depth fieldwork over a period of two months, one month in each country (see specifics below). Our aim was to gain deep understandings by focusing on a limited number of schools. The



**The reason why we believe it is important to distinguish between languages as communicative practice and languages as politico-economic constructs is that it enables us to move beyond simple understandings of whether EME is good or bad.**

fieldwork was carried out by female researchers of, respectively, Nepali and Nigerian heritage. The intention was to enable the researchers to establish the trust necessary to elicit the voices of some of the most hard-to-reach girls who may be most at risk of educational exclusion.

### Inclusion of minority voices

Our participants comprised students, parents, teachers, principals and policymakers. We sought to purposely include minority voices, e.g. Muslims in a Hindu-majority school in Nepal and Christians in a Muslim-majority school in Nigeria. We included both male and female participants in our sample in the hope of revealing potentially different views and attitudes to gender and EME held by these two groups.

### Elicitation of attitudes and practices

Our data set comprises both attitudinal data and practice-based data. Questionnaires, interviews and diary-keeping elicit participants' views about and attitudes to EME and gender, while classroom observations reveal their actual practices, which can be quite different from their attitudes.

Details about data, participants, data collection and analysis are given next.

## Questionnaires: data collection and analysis

Nepalese questionnaire participants were 103 students attending Shree Durga Vawani Secondary School. Given our interest in 'double disadvantages' (Milligan & Adamson, 2022), purposive targeting was used to ensure the inclusion of Muslim-minority participants. Although Nepal does not have the same Muslim–Hindu confrontation and history as India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, Muslims, and Muslim girls in particular tend to rank lowest in education access indicators (Upadhaya & Sah, 2019). Other intersections of relevance were (Hindu) caste and language/ethnic background. These are not differentiated in the questionnaire, but they emerge in the interviews. As the questionnaire was in English, interpreters and classroom assistants translated and explained the questionnaire to any students who appeared to struggle with English. The students were given time in and outside of class to complete the questionnaire if necessary. They were encouraged to respond to the open-ended answers in the language they felt most comfortable with and any such responses were subsequently translated into English.

Student participants in Nepal are defined by three characteristics: medium of education, sex and religion (see Table 2). While the number of

	EME stream (49 participants)			NME stream (54 participants)		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
<b>Hindu</b>	26	17	43	14	29	43
<b>Muslim</b>	2	4	6	3	8	11
<b>Total</b>	28	21	<b>49</b>	17	37	<b>54</b>

**Table 2** Matrix of Nepalese questionnaire participant characteristics

EME stream vs NME (Nepali-medium education) stream participants is fairly balanced, there are only six EME stream Muslim participants and 11 NME stream Muslim participants. The majority of the NME participants were girls and the majority of EME participants were boys. Students from each possible categorisation were included, with the smallest categories being EME Muslim boys (two participants) and NME Muslim boys (three participants).

Nigerian questionnaire participants were 118 students at two schools: the English-medium Constitution Day Secondary School and the Hausa-medium Islamic Madina Secondary School. The Hausa-medium is mixed-sex while the English-medium school has two sections: one for girls and one for boys. Data was collected to ensure the sample contained a similar number of EME and HME students, and male and female students (see Table 3). In total, 58 participants were recruited from the EME stream (28 male and 30 female); and 60 participants from the HME stream (31 male and 29 female). Purposive sampling was used to ensure even representation of the views of EME, HME, male, and female students as far as possible. The questionnaires were translated into Hausa to enable students to better understand them and answers to the open-ended questions not written in English were subsequently translated.

To capture potentially different views by different tribes or ethnicities, students were also classified by their home language. There were eight different home languages reported by students: Hausa, Fulani, Kanuri, Babur, Igbira, Yoruba, Nupe and Tuareg. Students within the dataset were characterised as having Hausa or another language as a home language. This cross-section is shown in Table 3 with close to an even split across the total number of male and female students in the EME and HME schools. We can note that 55 students in the dataset have a home language other than Hausa and 25 of these students are in the HME school. The students can also be characterised by religion, with 107 Muslim students and 11 Christian students. The 11 Christian students were all within the EME stream.

The quantitative questions were analysed by comparing the answers given by groups based on student characteristics (i.e. gender, religion, medium of education), visualising the data using bar charts and conducting multiple linear regression where appropriate. Multiple linear regression was used because student characteristics (e.g. Muslim and female) overlap and therefore comparisons in bar charts alone would conceal this complexity. However, in some cases, where there is only a handful of students in a certain demographic, the results may lack statistical power. Further light is shed on those groups in Interviews below.

	EME school (58 participants)			HME school (60 participants)		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
<b>Hausa HL*</b>	15	13	28	23	12	35
<b>Other HL*</b>	13	17	30	8	17	25
<b>Total</b>	28	30	<b>58</b>	31	29	<b>60</b>

**Table 3** Matrix of Nigerian questionnaire participant characteristics (\*HL = home language)

## Interviews: data collection and analysis

In total, 19 interviews were carried out with 30 participants in Nepal. Participants included students, a subset drawn from the questionnaire participants, their parents, teachers and the principal. A regional educational policymaker was also interviewed. Most of the students preferred to take part in group interviews (see Table 4). Participants were selected to include females and males of both Muslim and Hindu backgrounds and different Hindu castes. Participants were invited to be interviewed in the language in which they felt most comfortable.

In Nigeria, 58 semi-structured interviews were carried out with 58 participants. Participants included 20 parents, 21 students, 12 teachers, three principals and policymakers, and two federal-level policymakers from the Kano State Secondary Schools Management Board and Kano State Universal Basic Education Board, respectively (see Table 5). Interviews were conducted primarily in Hausa and English and were subsequently translated and/or transcribed into English.

Interviews were recorded, transcribed and translated to undergo a rigorous thematic analysis<sup>8</sup>. The fact that the data set comprised interviews from both Nepal and Nigeria was exploited to strengthen reliability: the first

Participants	Interviews	
	EME	NME
Parents	3	1
Students	10	8
Teachers	3	3
Principals		1
Policymakers		1
<b>Total</b>	<b>30 participants (across 19 interviews)</b>	

**Table 4** Nepalese interview participants

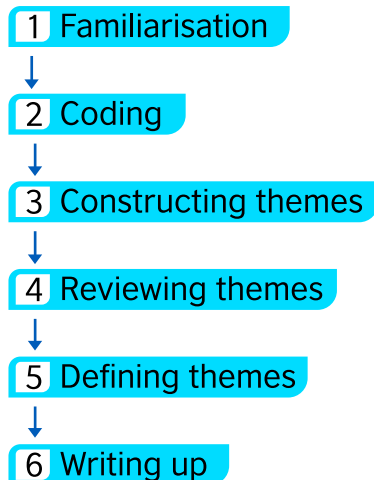
Participants	Interviews	
	EME	HME
Parents	10	10
Students	11	10
Teachers	6	6
Principals	2	1
Policymakers		2
<b>Total</b>	<b>58 participants (across 58 interviews)</b>	

**Table 5** Nigerian interview participants

8. Following guidelines of Braun & Clarke, 2021

thematic analysis focused on the Nepal data and was inductive, meaning that the themes emerged from the data itself; the second thematic analysis focused on the Nigerian data and was deductive, with the previously established themes used as a starting basis. Nonetheless, in both cases, the focus was on latent thematic analysis, looking beyond the surface meanings of what participants said to the underlying ideas, assumptions and conceptualisations that may have shaped or informed the semantic content of the data.

Each thematic analysis had six core phases:



In [Stage 1. Familiarisation](#), the written transcripts were reviewed for familiarity and errors, and initial notes were taken on any potential points of significance. This was essential in laying the groundwork for [Stage 2. Coding](#), where the common themes within the study were set out by a process of labelling. Using a colour-coding system, common linked statements were highlighted in to codify them and start dividing them into recurring themes. This round took place twice to ensure rigour and accuracy. Once all significant statements

were codified, [Stage 3. Constructing themes](#) began. This entailed combining labelled codes into broader umbrella themes that covered a wide range of recurring statements and opinions, which led to the establishment of four core themes: (1) The importance of education for gender equality; (2) Attitudes towards medium of education and gender; (3) Obstacles to both accessing and implementing EME/NME/HME; (4) Support needed to improve access and implementation of EME/NME/HME.

In some cases a series of sub-themes were also identified. For ‘attitudes towards medium of education and gender’, these sub-themes concerned positive and negative attitudes towards EME, NME or HME and other local languages. ‘Obstacles to both accessing and implementing EME/NME/HME’ and ‘Support needed to improve access and implementation of EME/NME/HME’, on the other hand, were split into ‘internal’ (i.e. within the school) and ‘external’ (i.e. within society) factors.

In [Stage 4. Reviewing themes](#), all previously identified themes and sub-themes were reviewed to reflect on whether they best categorised the findings. This reflection led to some statements moving into different themes that fit better than their first assigned category, while others were removed altogether as they lacked significant presence elsewhere. Next, in [Stage 5. Defining themes](#), the themes were reviewed for a final time and, once satisfied, a theme name was assigned that was succinct, yet clear, relevant and explanatory. Finally, in [Stage 6. Writing up](#), the results of the thematic analysis were reported, with significant findings supported by statements from the written transcripts.

## Classroom observations

To understand language use and gender inclusion in the classrooms, which can be different from what is being expressed in interviews and surveys, 12 classes were observed, across the English- and Nepali-medium streams and in different subjects as per Table 6. Both female and male teachers were observed. As far as possible, two classes were observed by each teacher. In English, two

classes of two different teachers were observed. The observer was seated on the last bench without interfering with the class, recording the classroom activities on an observation protocol. The protocol aimed to capture both teachers' and students' practices, focusing on actual languages used vis-à-vis official policy, the extent to which teachers promote the participation of girls and minority students, and the extent to which this is successful.

	EME	NME
	Social Studies (2)	Science (2)
	Environment Health and Population (1)	English (2)
	Computer Science (1)	Social Studies (4)
<b>Total</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>8</b>

**Table 6** Classroom observations in Nepal by stream and subject

In Nigeria, a total of 24 classes were observed, across the English and Hausa-medium schools and in different subjects (see Table 7). Both

female and male teachers were observed. Two classes were observed by each teacher, following the same procedures as for Nepal.

	EME		HME
	Boys	Girls	Boys and girls
	English (2)	Mathematics (2)	Computer Science (2)
	Basic Science (2)	French (2)	English (2, T1)
	Islamic Studies (2)	English (2)	English (2, T2)
			English (2, T3)
			Hausa (2)
			Arabic (2)
<b>Total</b>	<b>6 (3 teachers)</b>	<b>6 (3 teachers)</b>	<b>12 (6 teachers)</b>

**Table 7** Classroom observations in Nigeria by school and subject (T=teacher)

## Diaries

In Nigeria, six boys and six girls, three from each of the EME and HME schools, volunteered to keep a diary over the course of the fieldwork. The children, aged between 13 and 14, were given a notebook each to keep with them for the duration of the research. As instructed, the EME children wrote their diaries in English and the HME in Hausa, and the children wrote both at school and at home. The diary keeping was intended to yield participant-generated insights into gender ideologies and educational challenges and opportunities faced by the students.





# Nepal case study

## Nepal

Nepal is a multilingual, multi-ethnic, multi-religious and socioeconomically stratified nation, with more than 124 languages (National Statistics Office, 2023). Although never colonised by Britain, English enjoys high symbolic status and prestige (Sah & Li, 2018). Since the early 1990s, when a neoliberal policy paved the way for the establishment of private schools with EMI as their 'distinctive feature', a sharp rise in EME has occurred in the country (Padwad et al., 2023). Since then, private-school EME has been in high demand for families who can afford it. Ghimire states that 'the public consider English-medium schools to be better than others and they send their children to private schools in the name of quality education' (Ghimire 2019, p. 148). To compete with the private sector and meet parental demand for EME, government schools in Nepal have also increasingly begun to offer EME, one of which is the site of this research (Padwad et al., 2023). The trend towards EME has intensified since 2015, when a radical decentralisation of the education system took place, devolving power over educational policy to local municipalities (Sah & Karki, 2020). The rapid expansion in EME happens in spite of English language proficiency levels in the country being variable and generally low: Nepal ranks at 65 and is described as a 'low proficiency' country on the EF English Proficiency Index (EF EPI, 2023). English is used

as a lingua franca alongside Nepali and Hindi in Nepal.

Although the current language-in-education policy provides for basic education through one's mother tongue to reflect the linguistic diversity of the country; a policymaker interviewed as part of this research revealed that very few schools have adopted this approach because it is highly dependent on teacher availability (Ministry of Education Science and Technology, 2016). The Education Act also provides for the LoLT in upper-level education (Grades 6–10) to be in Nepali or English (Ministry of Education, 2019)<sup>9</sup>. While the law intended for schools to offer one stream only (either Nepali or English), many schools have chosen to make both streams available to students, as is the case for the school in this research. The policymaker expressed concern about the ability to provide 'quality instruction' in this form of education for two main reasons: teachers' limited knowledge of English and students' difficulty with absorbing content in English at lower levels of education. However, using Nepali as a medium of education can also cause comprehension challenges for some, as it is only the first language of approximately 44.86 per cent of the population and the second language of 46.23 per cent (Regmi, 2023).

In terms of gender equality, Nepal is a patrilineal and patriarchal society, permeated by widespread perceptions that girls are subordinate to boys, which influences girls'

<sup>9</sup> Note that there is a new School Education Bill 2023 currently going through parliament, which is likely to make significant changes to Language of Learning and Teaching. Although its details are yet to be seen, it appears to advocate for an expansion of EME.

access to education, information, health and the labour market (Upadhaya & Sah, 2019). Women face restrictions in terms of their basic ability to ‘independently venture outside the household, maintain the privacy of their bank accounts, use mobile phones, or become employed’ (Karki & Mix, 2022, p. 413). Illiteracy disproportionately affects females, with 83.6 per cent of males and 69.4 per cent of females being literate (Government of Nepal, 2022). Notwithstanding this, recent years have seen some progress in enhancing gender equality in Nepal, and girls currently have higher enrolment rates than boys across secondary education (UNESCO, 2023).

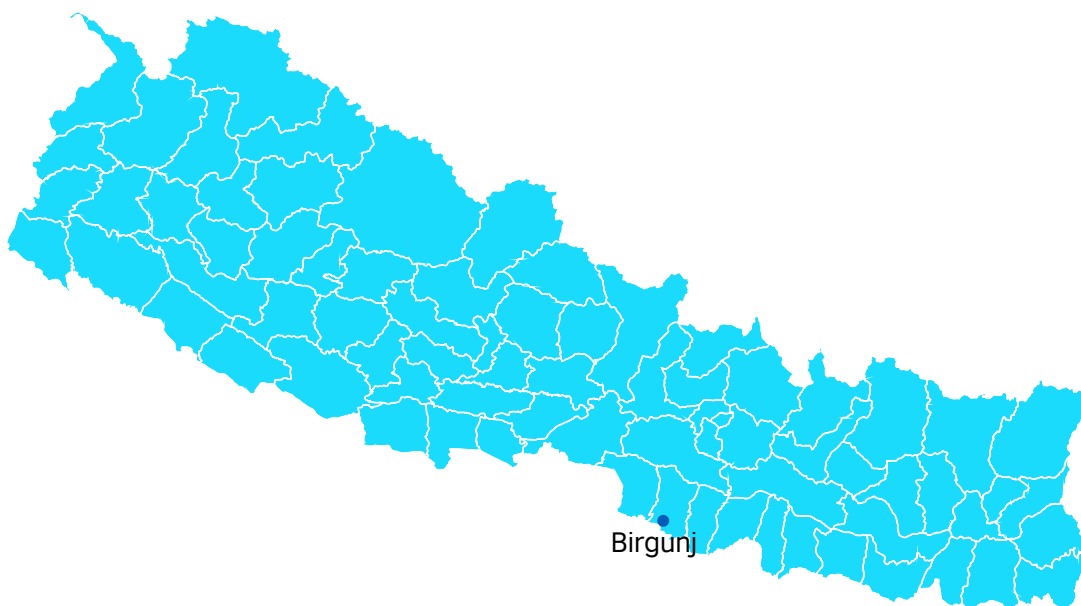
## Birgunj, Madhesh

Birgunj is a cosmopolitan city, located 135km south of the capital Kathmandu, in the Parsa District of Madhesh Province. According to the 2021 census, Birgunj has a population of 268,273, making it the sixth biggest city in Nepal (City Population, 2023). Although Nepali is the official language, Bhojpuri is the main language spoken in Birgunj. In addition to Bhojpuri, the other main local languages spoken are Maithili, Hindi and Bajjika. People of Madheshi ethnicity occupy the largest portion

of the Birgunj population, which includes such castes as Kurmi, Yadav, Teli, Mahato, Sonar, Kalwar, Baniyan, Rauniyar, Dom and Chamar from the Hindu community. While Muslims represent just 5.09 per cent of the total population of Nepal, they represent 20.8 per cent of the total population of Birgunj (National Statistics Office, 2023). The city has a 76.1 per cent literacy rate, with 38.92 per cent of inhabitants having only received a basic primary education (National Statistics Office, 2023). Given its rich ethnic, cultural, linguistic and socio-economic diversity, Birgunj offers a rich opportunity to explore how different social categories can intersect to create educational exclusion and marginalisation.

## Shree Durga Vawani Secondary School

The research was conducted in Shree Durga Vawani Secondary School in Birgunj<sup>10</sup> and focused on Grades 9 and 10, where students are typically aged 14–16 and follow the upper secondary curriculum, or Level 3 in the International Standard Classification of Education. Shree Durga Vawani Secondary School is a government<sup>11</sup> mixed-sex, dual-



10. This is a pseudonym.

11. Three types of schools have been identified in Nepal: community, institutional and religious schools (CEHRD 2020). When we refer to ‘government’ school in this report, we mean ‘community’ school. Government schools receive full or partial funding from the government.

medium school, where students are enrolled in either an English- or a Nepali-medium stream, henceforth EM(E) or NM(E). The streams run in the same school buildings with students enrolled in the EME stream attending classes in the morning, and students enrolled in the NME stream attending classes in the afternoon. Shree Durga Vawani is a Hindu-dominant school, reflected in Hindu iconography throughout the school, e.g. images of the Hindu Goddess of knowledge, Saraswati, decorate the walls in classrooms.

Under the Act Relating to Compulsory and Free Education (Government of Nepal, 2018), fees cannot be charged in government schools in Nepal; however, Shree Durga Vawani has developed a 'quasi-private system' (Sah, 2022a) whereby students in the EME stream are charged so-called 'donations' as contributions towards the salaries of the teachers, who are imported from the private sector. The implication of this fee structure is that the

students in the EME stream tend to come from families in the upper socio-economic classes, who can afford the fees. Typically, the parents of the EME students are professionals, working as teachers, office clerks or businessmen, whereas parents of the students in the NME stream are either daily wage labourers or street vendors. Fees are waived for Muslim girls due to their status as a religious minority. Another important difference between the NME and the EME stream is that the former does not have entrance exams, whereas the latter does. The implication is that students in the EME stream are pre-selected for their comparably higher academic ability and come from comparably better resourced and academically oriented families. Another difference between the two streams is that teachers in the NME stream are typically civil servants on a permanent contract, whereas in the EME stream, they are more often on a fixed-term, part-time contract, teaching across multiple schools in the private sector.

**Figure 1** Girls in Years 9 and 10 in Shree Durga Vawani Secondary School preparing for a lesson



Of particular relevance to this research is the fact that there are fewer girls than boys in the EME stream. Table 8 shows that whereas boys and girls are fairly evenly distributed across the NME stream (with 47 per cent of boys compared to 53 per cent girls), this is not the same across the EME stream. More than twice as many boys (69 per cent) as girls (31 per cent) attend the EME stream.<sup>12</sup>

	Boys	Girls
English-medium stream	75 (69%)	33 (31%)
Nepali-medium stream	65 (47%)	72 (53%)

**Table 8** Attendance rates in Grades 9 and 10 Shree Durga Vawani Secondary School by language stream and gender

Participation rates in the EME stream in Shree Durga Vawani Secondary School are out of sync with the national trend where boys and girls have equal participation: at lower secondary level 4 per cent of boys and girls are out-of-school; at upper secondary level, 15 per cent of boys and 15 per cent of girls are out of school (UNICEF, 2022).<sup>13</sup> While the national pattern reflects the more gender-equal pattern for the NME stream in Shree Durga Vawani Secondary School, it contrasts markedly with the much greater participation of males in the EME stream. It appears then that EME acts as a gender differentiator, separating out boys from girls.

## Questionnaire findings

### Medium of education preferences

Students were asked if they would rather attend an English-medium, a national-medium or a mother tongue school. A multiple linear regression model shows no statistically

significant difference between boys and girls in response to this question. Stream enrolment, however, was associated with statistically significant differences. Students who express the strongest preference for EME are those who are already enrolled in the EME stream.

Predictor	Coefficient	Standard Error	P-value
Intercept	0.14	0.08	0.079
Female (vs Male)	-0.06	0.08	0.437
EME (vs NME)	0.64	0.08	< 0.001***
Muslim (vs Hindu)	0.08	0.12	0.486

**Table 9** Multiple Regression Model for: If you had a choice, would you rather attend an English-medium, a national-medium or a mother tongue school? Data presented only includes answers which stated English (EME) or Nepali (NME).

- It should be noted that these figures are based on attendance data in Years 9 and 10 but see Sah, 2022a for enrolment data.
- Note that participation rates in Shree Durga Vawani Secondary School are based on participation data on a specific date (in the absence of enrolment data), whereas the UNICEF data is based on enrolment data.

In the interview data, discussed later, it will become clear that the preference for medium of education is associated with professional, educational and personal aspirations, which are not neutral, but entrenched in gendered expectations about the roles boys and girls should play in society.

### Self-rated language proficiency

Students' self-reported levels of proficiency include English proficiency, national language proficiency and mother tongue proficiency. All questions are rated on a scale of 1–5, with 1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest. The results of the multiple regression are shown in Table 10. As can be seen, only one factor was statistically significant: 'I rate my English'.

Table 11 shows that students in the EME stream were significantly more likely to self-report higher English proficiency. The other participant characteristics (sex and religion) did not have a bearing on self-reported English proficiency. Thus, being enrolled in an EME stream appears to contribute to students rating their English proficiency higher. This may be because a) they have more exposure to English and b) they get more opportunities to practise. It should also be borne in mind that the students in the EME stream come from higher socio-economic and more academically oriented families, which can also contribute to their higher self-reported English proficiency.

Model Outcome	Intercept ( $\alpha$ )	F-statistic	R <sup>2</sup>	P
I rate my English	2.55	15.48(3, 98)	0.32	< 0.001***
I rate my national language proficiency	4.27	0.34 (3, 98)	0.01	0.79
I rate my mother tongue proficiency	4.68	0.65 (3, 97)	0.02	0.59

**Table 10** Multiple regression analysis for self-reported proficiency

Predictor	Coefficient	Standard Error	P-value
Intercept	2.55	0.15	< 0.001***
Female (vs Male)	-0.13	0.16	0.414
EME (vs NME)	0.99	0.16	< 0.001***
Muslim (vs Hindu)	0.25	0.20	0.214

**Table 11** Multiple regression for: I rate my English proficiency

### Self-rated comprehension

Students were asked to rate their level of understanding of the course content. No demographic factor had a statistically significant impact on the responses to this question (see Table 12). This is interesting as one frequent argument against EME is that it is more challenging to understand course content in a language that is not one’s first. Language stream (EME vs NME) was closest to significance; however, it was the NME students who were most likely to report difficulties with understanding the content due to the language

of instruction. This serves as a reminder that even in the NME stream, most students do not learn through the language they know best, as many of them speak a different language from Nepali at home, such as Bhojpuri, Bajjika, Hindi and Maithili. Thus, they too can face challenges in understanding. Such challenges may be not only language-related but also due to other challenges, including teacher absenteeism and lack of investment in resources, which will be discussed in a later section.

Predictor	Coefficient	Standard Error	P-value
Intercept	0.95	0.12	< 0.001***
Female (vs Male)	-0.09	0.13	0.46
EME (vs NME)	-0.19	0.13	0.14
Muslim (vs Hindu)	0.13	0.17	0.44

**Table 12** Multiple Regression Model for: Do you have any difficulties in understanding the content of any subject areas because of the language of instruction being used in your classroom?

### Work outside education

Multiple linear regression was used to test whether gender, language steam or religion had a bearing on whether students reported having to work/earn money to support themselves or their family. The rationale for asking this question was that work outside education could potentially impact on students’ educational participation. Table 13 shows that the only factor with a statistically significant relationship with students having to work/earn

money was language stream. This is likely to reflect the fact that students in the NME stream come from lower socio-economic classes. Whether students were male or female did not predict whether they had to work to support themselves or their family; however, it is likely that the type of work in which girls and boys are required to work is gendered, and the interview responses provide some evidence in support of this.

Predictor	Coefficient	Standard Error	P-value
Intercept	0.74	0.12	< 0.001***
Female (vs Male)	-0.01	0.15	0.942
EME (vs NME)	-0.94	0.15	<0.001***
Muslim (vs Hindu)	0.20	0.20	0.324

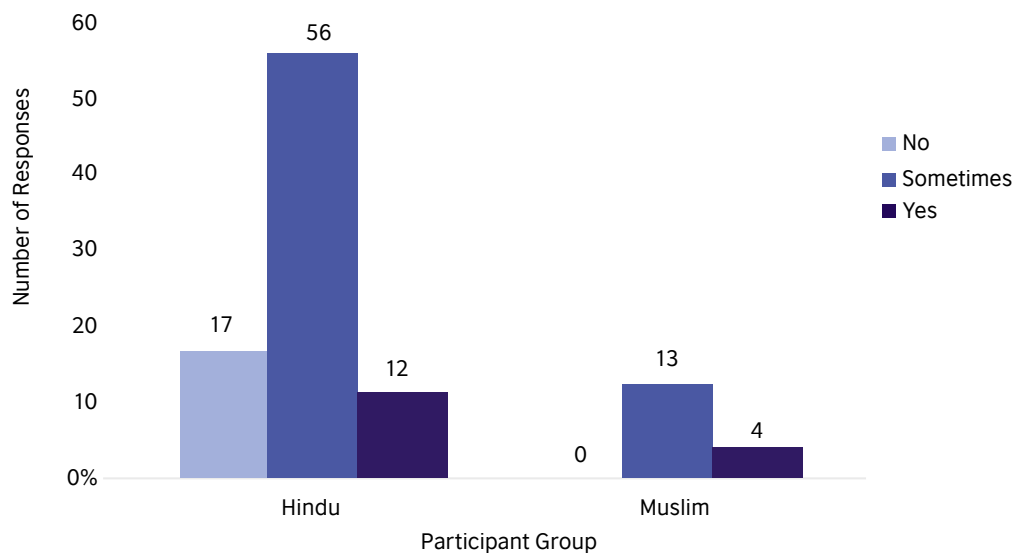
**Table 13** Multiple Regression Model for: Do you have to work/earn money to support yourself and/or your family members?

## Gender, ethnic and religious marginalisation

Figure 2 shows the answers to the question of whether teachers include discussion of minority students. As a reminder, in Nepal Muslim students are a minority in the school. Figure 2 shows that all 17 of the Muslim students responded either 'sometimes' or 'yes' to this question. This is similar to the Hindu students,

who also mostly answered 'sometimes' or 'yes'. While this suggests that minority students believe teachers include discussions of their religion, open-ended responses counterbalance this finding by providing evidence of marginalisation and discrimination.

Has any of your teachers ever included discussion of your culture (for example, your religion/language) in the course content?



**Figure 2** Answers to: Has any of your teachers ever included a discussion of your culture in the course content?

In the survey, students were invited to give open-ended responses to the question of whether certain groups of students (girls, Hindu/Muslim, etc.) face particular challenges and if so, what the challenges are.

Answers to this question pointed to particular challenges for Muslims, general challenges for girls and some language-based challenges for

Bhojpuri speakers. Examples of all three categories are shown on p. 32. A large number of students, however, answered 'no' to the question of whether particular groups faced challenges or discrimination, which may be interpreted as reflecting reality or, more likely, as unawareness of the existence of discrimination.

# Challenges for minorities

Muslim people have to face many challenges. My community is Hindu majority community because of which Muslims have to face even more problems.

**(English-medium Hindu boy)**

Muslim culture students have problem because most of the students in class are Hindu and Muslim are very little, and no one understand Muslim culture.

**(English-medium Hindu boy)**

I love my religion. I do not have many problem for belonging to the Muslim community.

**(Nepali-medium Muslim boy)**

We do not get enough holidays in our religious festival like other religion have.

**(Nepali-medium Muslim girl)**

I am a Muslim girl. I don't have to face any problem inside the classroom but I cannot tell about other Muslim girls.

**(Nepali-medium Muslim girl)**

I can see in our community that girls from Muslim community are restricted to wear modern dress, and the dress that Muslim girls want to wear. Girls from Muslim community have more problem in dresses than Hindu community.

**(English-medium Hindu girl)**

Yes, I have difficulties to understand other cultures, traditions, migration and about their food tradition. I am aware of Hindu culture only.

**(Nepali-medium Hindu boy)**

Muslim should complete their cultural, religious and linguistic responsibility and duty. It creates problem.

**(Nepali-medium Muslim boy)**

I am Muslim girl. I have to face many problems being Muslim. Hindu girls do not have to face problems.

**(Nepali-medium Muslim girl)**

There are many rules and regulations for girls in Hindu culture.

**(Nepali-medium Hindu girl)**

I do not have any sort of problem because I belong to Hindu community.

**(Nepali-medium Hindu girl)**

Hindu teachers know only about Hindu culture. If there are Muslim teachers they only know about Muslim culture. Teacher should know about all the culture of students and they should talk and discuss about all cultures and tradition.

**(Nepali-medium Hindu boy)**

There is discrimination in our classroom, people from different religion do not support each other, they have wrong thoughts for each other.

**(Nepali-medium Muslim girl)**

Hindu people gossip about each other. If girls wear short dresses then the society starts backbiting. Therefore, I little bit like Hindu religion.

**(Nepali-medium Hindu girl)**

Many girls face maximum problems. Mostly girls' parents from village think that their daughter should not be given more opportunity to study as they can't do anything after their daughters get married. Such things and tortures from parents take the concentration away from study.

**(English-medium Hindu girl)**

I am a Hindu girl. Girls always have to face many problems.

**(Nepali-medium Hindu girl)**



## General challenges for girls

Teachers discriminate between boys and girls. Teachers always agree with what boys say but never listen to girls.

**(Nepali-medium Hindu girl)**

During the time of menstruation, girls are not allowed to touch Islamic religion books.

**(Nepali-medium Muslim girl)**

It is very difficult stay in the classroom during menstruation. School should provide us some support and sanitary pads during our menstruation periods.

**(Nepali-medium Hindu girl)**

Girls have to face difficulties in school during their menstruation periods.

**(Nepali-medium Hindu girl)**

Girls are not allowed to touch God related stuffs during menstruation in Hindu culture. Girls are excluded during menstruation because of which we have to face many problems.

**(Nepali-medium Hindu girl)**

## Language-based challenges

We have difficulties in speaking Nepali and English language. We can easily speak in Bhojpuri language.

**(Nepali-medium Hindu girl)**

Bhojpuri is not taught in school.

**(Nepali-medium Hindu boy)**

We are Hindu and we only like Bhojpuri language. We are comfortable in Bhojpuri rather other languages.

**(Nepali-medium Hindu girl)**

It appears from these responses that, perhaps unsurprisingly, the group that is mentioned most often in connection with marginalisation and discrimination is Muslims, although Hindu girls, particularly those from lower castes, also report facing unique challenges. Additionally, girls in general report facing challenges during menstruation. Finally, despite belonging to a majority group, Bhojpuri speakers enrolled in the NME stream report language-related challenges stemming from being taught in Nepali.

# Interview findings

## Attitudes towards medium of education and gender

The interviews sought to explore the attitudes of participants towards medium of education and gender in greater depth. The analysis revealed that parents, students and teachers generally associate English with prestige and better opportunities in life for both boys and girls, while NME is considered only suitable for those wishing to pursue government jobs. Other regional languages, on the other hand, are deemed less prestigious and, therefore, not appropriate for formal education, although there is some recognition of the importance of Nepali and other local languages in terms of cultural identity, heritage and values. Different languages are associated with different career aspirations and personal, educational and professional opportunities, which themselves can be gendered.

### Positive attitudes towards EME

For girls in particular, English is seen as offering an 'escape' from typically low-paid, unskilled jobs:

*Because of the lack of knowledge, girls wash dishes in other's home. It wouldn't have been like that. If they had knowledge [of English], they could go towards banking sector, for example.*

**(Teacher 6, female, NME, Nepal)**

*You know that if girls can speak English more, they can progress in different aspects. They can [get] involve[d] in different kinds of jobs.*

**(Principal, male, Nepal)**

English is also viewed as essential to finding a job faster and obtaining a 'good' job in such fields as medicine, banking, engineering, business and teaching:

*The role that English has played is significant. Whatever one wants to be, engineer or doctor, they need English.*

**(Parent 23, female, EME, Nepal)**

*When our English will be good, we will get good job.*

**(Student 27, female, EME, Nepal)**

Among participants, there is a general belief that English is intrinsically associated with better financial and educational opportunities, enabling both boys and girls to move abroad for postgraduate studies. Many of the students interviewed want to pursue a master's degree or PhD in an English-speaking country:

*I want to study MBBS in a foreign university.*

*They speak in English, so it helps me to understand. **(Student 25, male, EME, Nepal)***

EME is viewed as laying the groundwork for such opportunities. The policymaker (female, Nepal) shared her own personal story in this regard:

*I was from Nepali medium government student. While doing my I.Sc., I didn't used to understand Physics and Chemistry while the lectures were given in English. The ones who had come from boarding school used to be more active. It makes difference. But, when I got to B.Sc. it later became good for me. I started feeling [good] about writing in English too. I understand from my experience that it's necessary.*

Given the strong use of English in higher education, there is also a perception that local languages are less useful as a medium of instruction during schooling:

*Bajjika and Nepali do not have much of a direct connection with his goal of becoming a C.A. [chartered accountant] or H.A. [hired accountant] or whatever he wants to study, but English is directly connected to his further study.*

**(Parent 25, male, EME, Nepal)**

Parents, in particular, value English for enabling their children to support the family, whether financially by offering English tuition classes in the local community or practically by helping to issue bills in English for the family business or aid younger siblings with their English studies:

*She helps in my work. If I need issue bills in English, she helps. If there are works to be in English, she helps.*

**(Parent 24, male, EME, Nepal)**

Central to the value of English for all participants is its status as a lingua franca, therefore breaking down geographical barriers and facilitating communication with people from other countries:

*English is an international language [that] helps me to communicate with different people.*

**(Student 91, female, NME, Nepal)**

*If you learn English you can survive in any corner and parts of the world.*

**(Teacher 5, female, NME, Nepal)**

*It is a world's language now, so if you go anywhere, you will need English.*

**(Teacher 1, male, EME, Nepal)**

Knowledge of English is also associated with more success in life and greater cultural knowledge, offering a gateway out of poverty and a chance to break free of local boundaries. To this end, many participants express a language and epistemic hierarchy, with English at the top, followed by Nepali and then local languages:

*To make your own name in the country, you need to know English, I believe [...] Our language has a boundary. Nepali in Nepal, Bajjika at our home, at our places.*

**(Parent 25, male, EME, Nepal)**

English, thus, carries a certain prestige for many, with participants expressing a sense of pride at speaking 'proper' English and revelling in the positive comments received by others:

*When I speak English, my father feels proud of me. (Student 48, female, EME, Nepal)*

*It is also good for [students'] identity, and they can say that they are from English-medium schools. (Teacher 2, male, EME, Nepal)*

However, some students also convey frustration that English has become an 'obligation' nowadays and that there are stigmas attached for those who do not learn it properly:

*There is no value in acquiring Nepali in our society. They humiliate us if we don't know English. So English is compulsorily needed in the society. (Student 105, female, EME, Nepal)*

## Negative attitudes towards EME

Among all participants (even those following the NME stream), positive attitudes towards EME far outweigh negative attitudes, with very few examples of hostility towards studying in English. Some teachers, however, see EME as a passing trend and point out that government jobs require Nepali rather than English and, therefore, the focus of girls' education in particular should be on NME:

*In our community, girls do not need this [EME]. I have seen the benefit of English nowhere. I haven't seen anywhere in our own surrounding. That is just a fashioned language [...] It's just okay to gossip. (Teacher 4, male, NME, Nepal)*

*There is a less chance for the girls to go abroad so Nepali can be important for them.*  
**(Teacher 1, male, EME, Nepal)**

Teacher 4 (**male, NME, Nepal**) also emphasises that even if a Nepalese person were to study medicine in English, ‘when the time comes for treatment’, they still have to converse with patients in their local language; therefore, English is not sufficient.

Some students do not enjoy EME or are unwilling to study EME due to perceptions about the difficulties of the language: ‘if I go there [to an EME school], it will be a big mistake’ (**Student 92, male, NME, Nepal**), while some parents express a preference for government EME schools over private EME schools because they lead to greater access to scholarships and government jobs, as well as carrying greater prestige.

Another source of opposition stems from worries that EME leads to both a loss of proficiency in one’s mother tongue and a loss of cultural identity. Specifically, participants believe that it can be problematic to neglect Nepali and other local languages because they represent cultural heritage, play an important role in developing identity and are still necessary for communicating in everyday life: ‘[Nepali] is like our heart’ (**Student 48, female, EME, Nepal**). Other students think that they are able to express their emotions far more easily in their native language: ‘[my] mother tongue helps to express feeling with my mother and other relatives’ (**Student 24, female, EME, Nepal**). On a deeper level, there are fears that EME poses a risk to the survival of local languages and that mother tongues should be ‘handed over from generation to generation’ (**Teacher 2, male, EME, Nepal**) to prevent their loss.

## Positive attitudes towards NME

As Nepali is used in all official contexts, from governance and education to law and mass

media, for the vast majority of participants, the biggest advantage of NME is, therefore, the access that it can provide to government jobs, particularly for girls. While government jobs are not the preserve of women, there are certain quotas for women in government jobs. It is also worth noting that all civil service exams are held in Nepali, so students from NME may have an advantage if they have better Nepali competence than EME students.

*In future, many girls want to fight in public service commission examinations, and they will need Nepali for that purpose.*  
**(Policymaker, female, Nepal)**

*To get government job, we need to learn Nepali. I encourage my students to talk in Nepali.*  
**(Teacher 5, female, NME, Nepal)**

*We do have one perception in our society that we need a government job. For this, Nepali is most important.*  
**(Teacher 4, male, NME, Nepal)**

Given the large number of Nepali speakers, it is unsurprising that many participants believe that lessons are much easier to understand when content is delivered in Nepali:

*I don’t feel much difficulty. I have been studying in Nepali for a long time, and we are used to this language as often speak and hear this language.* (**Student 24, male, NME, Nepal**)

*I like Nepali-medium as I have been studying in it since my basic level. It is easy to understand in Nepali-medium.*  
**(Student 88, female, NME, Nepal)**

*If other things are taught in English, they can forget but the concept is clear when taught in Nepali.* (**Teacher 6, female, NME, Nepal**)

## Negative attitudes towards NME

The main arguments against NME work in tandem with those in favour of EME, namely that NME offers fewer opportunities to move,

study and work abroad, as well as communicate with people from other countries. In direct conflict with some of the previously expressed views, some participants feel that NME streams are inferior to EME streams due to the poor quality of teachers and the lack of discipline:

*We don't get good education [...] Teacher don't teach nicely in Nepali medium. Only English medium student can understand because they are taught nicely.*

**(Student 60, female, NME, Nepal)**

*There is more discipline [in English medium]. No one makes noise there.*

**(Student 60, female, NME, Nepal)**

Many students also express frustration that they only attend NME because of their families' low socio-economic status. This leads to an overwhelming feeling that they are 'settling' for second best and that Nepali has less value:

*I would have gone [to an EME school] if my family financial condition was good.*

**(Student 64, female, NME, Nepal)**

*I had once thought [of studying in English], but I had a poor financial status. So, I came here in this medium.*

**(Student 94, male, NME, Nepal)**

## Attitudes towards other local languages

Despite large percentages of children speaking a language other than Nepali at home (e.g. Maithili, Bhojpuri, Bajjika), and also to varying degrees using them in classrooms, views of other local languages are generally negative among parents, students and teachers. Most participants point to the limitations of local languages and, while acknowledging their importance to cultural identity, believe that they should be restricted to family use only:

*Local languages are used in society. That is a home's language but when it comes to school, that is not important.*

**(Principal, male, Nepal)**

*Local languages are not really important. English is needed. If someone knows English, that's enough.*

**(Parent 24, male, EME, Nepal)**

Furthermore, when teachers hear students speaking Bhojpuri or Bajjika at school, they actively discourage its use:

*I tell them, 'You can speak your mother tongue at home but, at least, use Nepali with your friends at school'.*

**(Teacher 5, female, NME, Nepal)**

Even in lower-grade schools where lessons are delivered in local languages, parents are dissatisfied. Recounting a recent visit to one such school, the policymaker states:

*When I visited there, there were parents who said, 'You teach your children in English-medium schools, and you're asking our children to learn in a non-marketable language'. Where is the market for local languages!*

**(Female policymaker, Nepal)**

The same policymaker also notes a political aspect to the choice of schools, explaining that people who are opposed to mother tongue education deliberately send their children to EME schools rather than NME schools. Despite the general opposition to education through the medium of local languages, however, the policymaker believes that it is essential at lower level because it is easier to understand and supports 'gender equity', as well as the later learning of both Nepali and English. As she puts it:

*If we are thinking of gender equity through language, the use of mother tongue can be helpful, but they should also learn Nepali in latter grades.*

**(Female policymaker, Nepal)**

For her, mother tongues, Nepali and English 'should not be seen as competitive but complementary to one another'. However, she recognises that the market for English is 'so strong' that it is difficult to stop its spread.

## Obstacles to accessing and participating in EME/NME

While the interviews indicate a general desire to provide boys and girls with equal access to education, as well as specific attitudes towards the implementation of either EME or NME, there is a complex array of factors reported by participants as obstacles. These obstacles can be split into internal and external factors: the former referring to limitations within a schooling context; and the latter referring to limitations on a broader societal or political level. Internal obstacles seem to affect both boys and girls, but external obstacles overwhelmingly impact girls, particularly those from a Madhesi background.

### Internal obstacles

#### *Lack of linguistic and communicative competence*

A major internal obstacle in both EME and NME settings is the students' lack of competence in the language because it is not their first language or the one they know best. This means that certain topics or subjects are far harder to understand and cause stress and extra work for students:

*I can't learn it... it is a headache for me to learn social studies. I read twice or thrice but unable to learn it.*

**(Student 105, female, EME, Nepal)**

*Teachers teaches us in English, and we hardly understand it. When we go home then we read it twice. After that we get a clear picture of it.*

**(Student 48, female, EME, Nepal)**

*In our class, many students don't understand anything. Only the talented students who understand ask questions sometimes. If we don't understand, what do we ask!*

**(Student 60, female, NME, Nepal)**

All teachers interviewed outline a similar issue, overwhelmingly identifying students' lack of

competence in either English or Nepali as the primary obstacle to learning:

*As English isn't our first language and almost all students speak Bhojpuri language and also a mix Nepali background, English is difficult to understand. Sometimes, words are difficult to understand while teaching them in English. It's difficult to make them understand the meaning of those words, and if they don't understand the meaning, then it is a big challenge for them.*

**(Teacher 2, male, EME, Nepal)**

Linked to lack of competence is the problem of multilingualism, meaning that students rely predominantly on their native tongues (mainly Maithili, Bhojpuri or Bajjika), both in and outside the classroom:

*They communicate in Bhojpuri. After the teacher finishes teaching, they do all the communication in Bhojpuri. While interacting with friends and doing any other interactions, they all speak in Bhojpuri. That's why their Nepali is weak.*

**(Teacher 6, female, NME, Nepal)**

Lack of competence in the language also leads to poor behaviour in the classroom or poor interactions with teachers because students, particularly girls, feel too embarrassed or shy to speak publicly. This, in turn, can result in low student motivation:

*We don't understand the lesson, so our classmates just make noise.*

**(Student 26, female, EME, Nepal)**

*All students can't do interaction with teachers in English. This is also the reason why they don't ask questions in the classroom. If they are asked to question in Nepali-medium, their interaction can be good with teachers. But in English, it is difficult for them.*

**(Teacher 1, male, EME, Nepal)**

*Yes, when I ask why don't speak, they say 'sir, I feel afraid in Nepali. My friends also laugh'. So, they don't have confidence. They say, 'sir, if you want to ask, ask me separately'.*

**(Teacher 4, male, NME, Nepal)**

*Yes, because of the language, they feel shy. They can't say the things they want to say.*

**(Teacher 3, female, EME, Nepal)**

In other cases, it is the teachers' lack of competence that is seen as a major obstacle to learning. This appears to be a particular issue in the EME stream:

*His [the teacher] English is not proficient. He always does grammatical mistake while speaking in English [...] He does not care either students understand or not.*

**(Student 105, female, EME, Nepal)**

*Students' English is better, but we cannot speak in front of him. He is senior.*

**(Student 26, female, EME, Nepal)**

In the NME stream, on the other hand, most problems with teachers centre on them being frequently absent from class, not checking homework or delivering strict punishments to students:

*Because she [the teacher] is always absent, students also get absent a lot [...] She might ask for the homework some other day when we haven't brought it. And then, she gives us punishment. **(Student 104, female, NME, Nepal)***

*We do homework, but they don't check it. As we want to improve our studies, we do the homework daily but they never check it.*

**(Student 88, female, NME, Nepal)**

The more frequently reported teacher absenteeism in the NME stream could be due to the contractual status of the teachers. Whereas in the NME stream teachers are typically civil servants on permanent contracts, teachers in the EME stream are hired on a part-time, fixed-term basis and teach across multiple schools in the private sector. Possibly, their fixed-term, part-time contractual status means that teachers in the EME stream are more

reliable in their attendance than those on permanent contracts.

### **Lack of resources**

On a more practical level, one teacher flagged up the issue of class size, noting that there are typically '60–65 students in one class' (Teacher 5, female, NME, Nepal) and, therefore, the whole lesson is spent trying to manage them. Several teachers also identified the lack of resources as a problem, with textbooks not readily available for students ('books are not available') (Teacher 5, female, NME, Nepal); ('they don't have books') (Teacher 6, female, NME, Nepal). Lack of resources was more frequently reported in the Nepali- than the EME stream. However, students in the EME stream also expressed a wish for greater resources, here, the provision of computer and science labs:

*We don't have practical in computer lab and science lab, too. If there are all these facilities, we will be happier. Otherwise, it is tough to understand computer.*

**(Student 24, female, EME, Nepal)**

### **Lack of diverse and inclusive teaching material**

Some students comment on the lack of diverse and inclusive teaching materials to represent and engage ethnic and religious minorities. Shree Durga Vawani Secondary School is a Hindi majority school where many Hindi icons are on display. One student expresses a wish for more inclusive teaching materials:

*There is not any topic about our historical background in any books. There are many topics of Hindi, Christian, and Buddhism. In social studies also, there is no history about Muslim. We have not got any historical idea through our schooling. We have become voiceless. We may feel easy if there is our history in the school curriculum. We may feel happy and inclusive as well.*

**(Student 24, female, EME, Nepal)**

This lack of inclusion applies to communication too; here, one teacher comments on the difficulties some communities have with understanding Nepali:

*Most of the students are from Madhesi, and Madhesi students don't know Nepali tone and words. It would be hard to understand some words.*

**(Teacher 6, female, NME, Nepal)**

## External obstacles

### Socio-economic background

For both boys and girls, educational choices are strongly linked to socio-economic background, with poverty being the underlying factor that shapes a family's decision to send their child to an NME, rather than an EME, stream or school. In Nepal, this choice intersects with gender: ('I have difficulty to have my daughter attend English-medium school as we are poor family') (Parent 24, male, EME, Nepal). The policymaker describes EME students as being 'a little bit hi-fi' (i.e. from a rich background). Elaborating on differences between communities and access to education, she states:

*In the hills, like Rautes are very poor in education. [...] Their economic status is also very low. So, they are, by default, deprived of educational opportunities. Even Bahun and Chhetri [upper castes] are poor. Even they work in other's houses.*

**(Female policymaker, Nepal)**

Given their poor backgrounds, many NME students have problems with literacy:

*They should at least know how to read and write in class 10. But 25 per cent of them don't even know how to read and write.*

**(Teacher 4, male, NME, Nepal)**

### Early marriage and the dowry practice

Another factor which can contribute to girls' underrepresentation in EME is early marriage and dowry which, despite being illegal, is still present in Madhesh. Although there is no explicit evidence of this in the interviews, dowry can be linked to choice of medium of education since if EME is seen as the more prestigious education, a higher dowry will be needed. This can contribute to parents preferring to send their daughters to NME.

The problem is particularly prevalent among Muslims and the Madhesi Dalit community (people belonging to the lowest stratum of the caste system) and is tied up with poverty, prestige and honour. Girls as young as twelve may be forced into marriage, and made to drop out of school to look after the home. As a male teacher in the EME stream explains:

*Those from good family background and those who belong to rich family, they don't have early marriage issues. I haven't seen early marriage in rich families. But those who are economically poor and don't have education, they have this issue. [...] Because of dowry system also. Parents have to find a boy according to the level of their daughter's education. To search educated boys, they have to go to a rich family. That's why they think that if girls are made to study more, they have to search rich boys who will demand lots of money.*

**(Teacher 1, male, EME, Nepal)**

A female teacher in the NME stream states:

*Dowry is a huge problem. Its effects are dangerous. There is a perception that the more they are educated, the more educated and richer boy they must find. If they have educate up to class 10, they search for at least twelve pass boys. The boys who have passed 12 class demand 2/3 lakhs dowry. The more the boy is educated, the more demand they make. So, the reason behind not educating daughters is also this one.*

**(Teacher 6, female, NME, Nepal)**



In the student interviews, both girls and boys express frustration at how damaging the practice is to girls' education. They also express a need to change it, outlining the link with cases of early school dropout, depression, domestic violence, suicide and even murder:

*Some girls are dominated because of dowry system. Many people don't want to give a birth to girls because of the dowry system. Government should bring planning and policies in order to abolish from this system.*  
**(Student 25, male, EME, Nepal)**

*There is a huge issue of dowry system. If there is no dowry, girls are killed or even punished bitterly.*  
**(Student 88, female, NME, Nepal)**

Teachers also shared first-hand experiences of girls who were married against their will and then stopped attending class, while one interviewed student is currently in this predicament and felt hesitant to discuss the topic for fear that her parents would find out her true feelings.

## Household responsibilities

Another major obstacle to education is household responsibilities. While most Hindu and Muslim families do not require their sons to do chores, their daughters are expected to help with cooking, cleaning and shopping, which gives them little free time to study:

*They have to work in kitchen most of the time, help parents in the farm and sanitation at home [...] girls are interested [in learning] but there is no time to study.*  
**(Teacher 5 female, NME, Nepal)**

*It's our culture that girls are mostly faced with domestic works. Because of that, guardian should have to manage time. That problem isn't there for boys.*  
**(Teacher 4, male, NME, Nepal)**

*When it comes about household works, it's only girls, not boys. Girls are made to do all household works, usually.*  
**(Teacher 3, male, EME, Nepal)**

## Social stigma, gender discrimination and sexual harassment

Although most families agree on the importance of educating girls, many also highlight the discrimination that they face by their local community for wanting to provide their daughters with an education: 'we get [mental] torture from the society that I'm educating my daughters'.  
**(Parent 24, male, EME, Nepal)**

Beyond schooling, female students also outline their lack of freedom in Nepalese society ('girls are dominated in our patriarchal country')  
**(Teacher 6, female, NME, Nepal)**, particularly in terms of their inability to leave home freely, to attend parties, to wear attractive clothes, to form friendships with boys and even to touch things when menstruating out of a belief that they are dirty. As a result, girls are fearful of doing anything in school that could result in increased social stigma:

*If girls do a little bit mistake, they will marriage them off, and stop them from come out their house, and even stop study. And if boys do the same mistake, even if they fight in school, parents say nothing to him. If girls do the same, teachers also scold them [...] They [society] won't let them [girls] live peacefully. Many of them even attempt to commit suicide too.*  
**(Student 104, female, NME, Nepal)**

While students generally consider school a safe environment for girls, Teacher 5 (female, NME, Nepal) notes that a female student was a victim of sexual harassment, which was 'resolved' by marrying her off to the boy in question.

# Classroom observations

Classroom observations focused on actual teaching practices with regard to language use and the engagement of girls in the classroom.

## Official versus de facto English-medium education

A main finding is that the English-medium policy rarely corresponds to de facto practice. For example, in three of the four classes observed in the EME stream, the supposedly English-medium Computer Science class was taught almost exclusively in Nepali, with the exception of some English words used for classroom organisational purposes, e.g. 'Keep quiet', 'Sit down', 'Stand up'. Similarly, in the English-medium Social Studies class, the teacher also taught almost exclusively in Nepali, using English only for topic introductions. This is partly because in 2019, the Government of Nepal decreed that Social Studies should no longer be taught in English but in Nepali, given its locally anchored topics (Shrestha, 2022). It can also stem from the teacher's lack of competence or confidence in using English and from perceptions of their students' lack of English competence. There was certainly an awareness among teachers, as expressed during interviews that students' English language competence was not sufficiently high for them to be able to teach exclusively or even predominantly in English:

*Only English is not possible in our classroom, so sometimes I use English and Nepali. My priority is to teach in English, but they can't understand in English only. Therefore, I use both mediums.*

**(Teacher 5, female, NME, Nepal)**

Apparent lack of fluency in English, however, did not prevent the teacher of Environment, Health and Population from teaching in 'very broken English', according to the fieldnotes, making the lesson 'very difficult to understand'.

The lack of competence by many students and teachers makes the implementation of EME in low-proficiency contexts questionable, notwithstanding the overwhelming view that is expressed during interviews of the many benefits English brings.

In all the classes observed, teachers engaged in ample translanguaging practices, i.e. the drawing on linguistic resources from different named languages. This happened both in the English and the NME stream. For instance, in the English-medium Social Studies class, the teacher used English for the topic introduction, switching to Nepali for explanations, examples, rapport building and for writing on the board. Conversely, in the NME Computer Science and Social Studies classes, the teacher wrote or repeated important terms in English. The Computer Science teacher, while predominantly using Nepali, also exceptionally used Hindi to explain concepts in greater detail. Nepali and Bhojpuri were used in some classes by the teacher to check students' understanding of some main concepts or to explain them in greater depth. However, usage of Bhojpuri, the regional language, will necessarily not be available to teachers who are not from the area. Naturally, both teachers of English taught extensively in English, despite it being the NME stream. During interviews, teachers expressed awareness of translanguaging being necessary for enhancing understanding. As one teacher in the EME stream said:

*They understand better in Nepali. That's why I have to say some words or sentence in Nepali, but I mainly speak in English thinking that they may learn by listening.*

**(Teacher 3, female, EME, Nepal)**

The fact that streams are designated English and NME is to some extent a misnomer as it does not correspond to actual classroom practice. In both the English and NME stream, other languages are being used, extensively so in the EME stream, where Nepali is in the majority of cases predominantly used. Furthermore, in the NME Social Studies class, there were even students present who were actually enrolled in the EME stream. This raises the question of why streams are officially designated as EME and NME, when this clearly does not correspond to actual language practice. To some extent, the labels seem to be nomenclatures that work as organisational devices, signalling and upholding a two-tiered system, where EME has come to represent 'superiority' and 'quality' – at least on the surface. In fact, it was observed that teachers often use the terms to differentiate between

different students, saying, e.g. it was the boy from the NME stream who got into a fight.

## Engagement of girls in the classroom

An immediate finding to strike an outsider in the Nepali classroom is the seating arrangement, whereby boys are seated on the left and girls on the right (see Figures 3 and 4). An outsider may speculate whether this seating arrangement predisposes the teacher to address one gender more than the other, and perhaps even serves to perpetuate wider ideologies that girls and boys are different and ought to be treated differently. On the other hand, it can also make teachers more mindful of ensuring inclusion of both sexes, and it can also work as a safeguarding measure to prevent harassment. Notwithstanding this, no clear pattern emerges from the observational data that one gender participates more than the other. In the NME Social Studies class, some boys appeared more talkative than girls,

**Figure 3** Girls seated on the right-hand side of the classroom





**Figure 4** Boys seated on the left-hand side of the classroom

although this is not the case for all subjects. In the absence of evidence of any systemic gender-differentiated treatment, fieldnotes do provide glimpses of teachers' interactions with girls and boys. For instance, the Computer Science teacher asked one girl to read out from the textbook, which is in Nepali, and when the girl failed to read fluently, she was strictly ordered to sit down. This happened to another girl too, but when a boy was asked the same and also failed to read fluently, the teacher tried to support him to improve his reading. Of course, there are too few of these examples to enable generalisations, and in any case, differential treatment of boys and girls is likely to vary from teacher to teacher. The English teacher, for instance, who was female, would ask the girls first, e.g. 'what is direct speech' and when they did not respond, she would ask the boys the same question. When asked during interviews, several teachers commented that they made a deliberate effort to include girls in the classroom discussions and on the whole, boys and girls appear equally active, or perhaps more appropriately, *inactive*, in the classrooms.

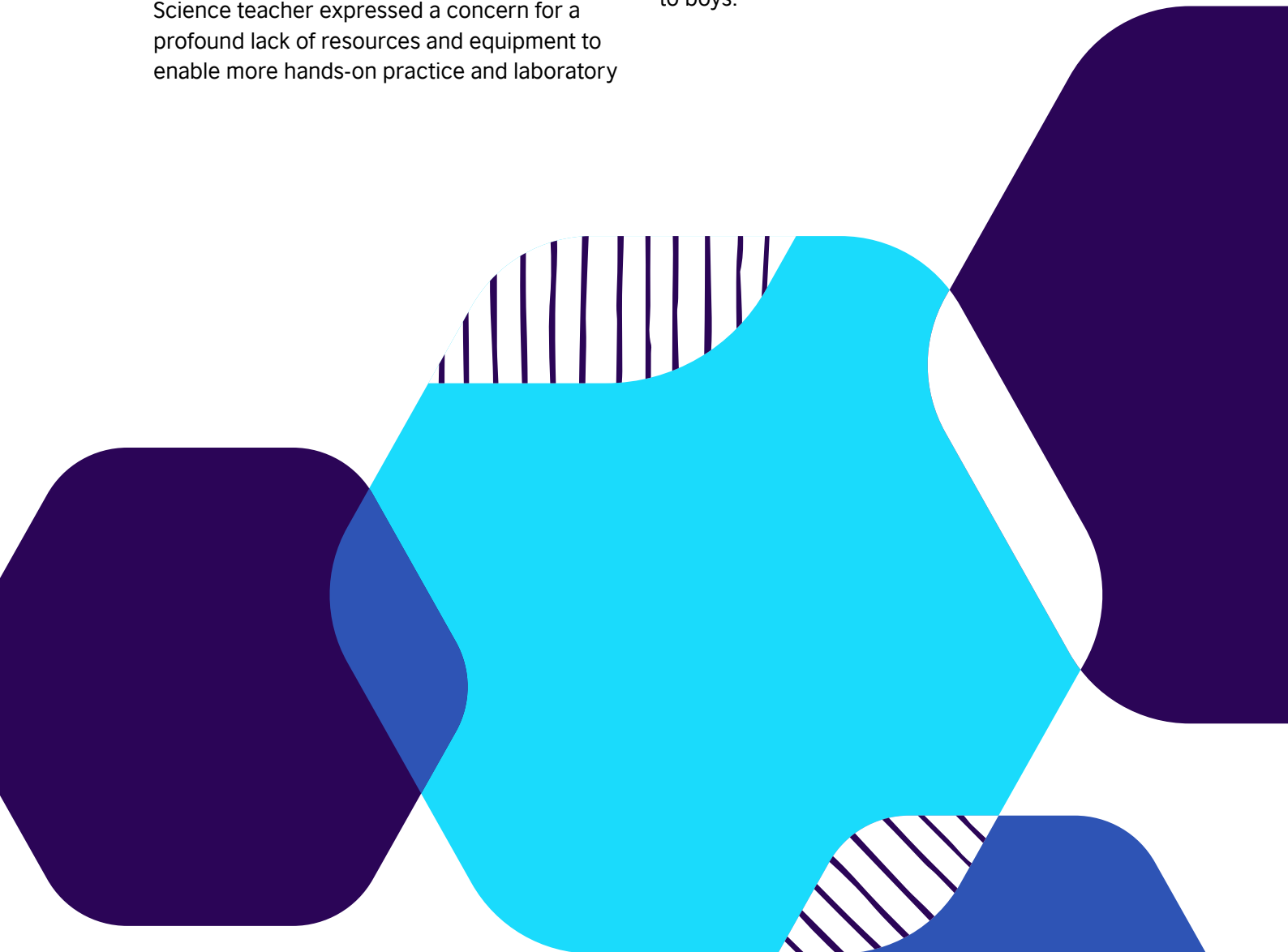
The lack of opportunities for girls – and boys – to interact reflects a primarily teacher-centred approach by most teachers. In the classes observed, student group work did not take place, and no resources other than the textbooks were used in the teaching. However, teachers do write on the whiteboard, set writing exercises, and many invite students to answer questions, although they differ in the extent to which they do so. One NME class was very teacher-centred with the only involvement of students being reading aloud from the textbook. Another English-medium class was a revision class, with the teacher concentrating on asking students to memorise answers by heart. Teacher interactivity and student engagement do not appear to correlate with medium of education, reminding us that teacher pedagogy is often more relevant than medium of education when it comes to engaging students, and girls specifically. Students themselves, whether girls or boys, rarely ask any questions, although this too varies by subject and by teacher.

In terms of the inclusion of girls (and boys) from ethnic, cultural and religious minorities, the

school is Hindu majority with icons of various Hindu Gods on school walls. Some fieldnotes suggest that more Hindu girls are given an opportunity to answer questions in class, and that the content taught is mainly directed at mainstream Hindu students. In the Social Studies class, for instance, the teacher was discussing 'human values' and equated this with 'Hindu values'. Muslim girls tended to be seated together in groups; in some observed classes at the back, in others at the front. The observer was not able to distinguish with similar ease boys of Muslim descent as they do not wear a hijab.

Although the extent to which teachers are able to engage students in classroom participation can impact on students' motivation and learning, it is important to bear in mind that the responsibility for engaging students cannot fall squarely on teachers. During interviews, a Science teacher expressed a concern for a profound lack of resources and equipment to enable more hands-on practice and laboratory

experiments. Across interviews, surveys and observations, lack of resources emerges as a consistent theme, with the observational fieldnotes commenting on some girls not having the required textbook in Computer Science. Observational notes also make ample reference to dirty, noisy and crowded classrooms, students arriving late, a lack of discipline, litter on the floor and graffiti on the walls. Several instances of corporal punishment were witnessed during fieldwork, mainly involving boys, where the punishment was for getting into fights with other boys. Girls, however, were not spared, and one teacher hit a girl twice on the palm, once for each time she gave an incorrect answer to his question. There is some suggestion that girls are scolded for issues to do with conduct, e.g. not having tied up their hair in braids, and that such reprimands related to dress or appearance are not issued to boys.



# Nigeria case study

## Nigeria

Unlike Nepal, Nigeria is a former colony of Britain thus English has a longer history and is more entrenched in society. English is but one of over 500 languages spoken, making Nigeria the most linguistically rich country in Africa (Tom-Lawyer et al., 2021; Trudell, 2017). Although Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba are national languages, English has been the official language since Nigeria became a sovereign state in 1960, to promote national unity and avoid favouring one particular indigenous language. Today, English is the most widely spoken language in Nigeria, spoken by 60 million of the population (Dokua Sasu, 2023). English proficiency levels are generally high, with Nigeria being described as a 'high proficiency' nation and ranking at 28 on the EF English Proficiency Index (EF EPI, 2023). Compare this with Nepal, which is a 'low-proficiency' country, ranking 65 in the world (EF EPI, 2023). Notwithstanding this, however, English proficiency levels vary greatly and are generally much higher among the urban elite than the rural and less affluent segments of the population (Trudell, 2017).

There is no stand-alone language-in-education policy in Nigeria, although statements about the provision of certain languages in education are incorporated in the National Policy of Education (NPE), most recently revised in 2013 (Trudell, 2017). According to the NPE, every child shall learn in the language of their immediate environment in the first three years, while English language shall be taught as a school subject. The policy states that from the fourth year of basic education, English shall

'progressively be used as a medium of instruction', with the implication being that English is the medium of instruction throughout secondary school (NERDC, 2013, p. 8). This policy, however, is difficult to implement (Ochoma, 2015) and certainly not always followed in reality, as can be seen by the Hausa-medium school in this research. Additionally, the policy makes provision for 'the language of the immediate environment and French and Arabic' to be taught as subjects from the fourth year of basic education (NERDC, 2013, p. 8). According to Policymaker 1, interviewed as part of this research, the current language policy is 'adequate' because English is prioritised, with other local languages playing a supporting role, thus promoting 'the diversity of Nigerian culture and indigenous languages'. The policymaker's statement signals the important status English has in Nigeria. English is also used in the teacher training programmes in Nigeria (Nel & Ssentanda, 2023). In November 2022, the Nigerian government approved a new National Language Policy that mandates the use of the mother tongue as a language of instruction for the first six years of learning (Aljazeera, 2022). According to Nigeria's Minister of Education, Adamu Adamu, the objective of this new policy is 'to promote and enhance the cultivation and use of all Nigerian languages' (Aljazeera, 2022). The mother tongue would then be combined with English at junior secondary level. The decision is only in principle for now, however, as it would require much work to implement and would involve increased provision of qualified teachers and the development of new instructional materials.

## Kano City, Kano State

The fieldwork took place in two secondary schools in Kano City, Kano State. With roughly 13 million inhabitants (EUAA, 2021), Kano State is the most populous state in Nigeria. It is a Muslim-majority state, which operates under Sharia law within the legal framework of the Nigerian Constitution. The state's capital and largest city is Kano – the second most populous city in Nigeria after Lagos, with over 4 million citizens (World Population Review, 2023). Kano State was the site of several prior kingdoms and empires, and became a major centre for commercial activity in the 15th century, which is reflected in the state's nickname: the 'Centre of Commerce', and making it comparable to our other field site, Birgunj, which is known as the 'Commercial Capital of Nepal'. Unlike Nepal, however, which has never been colonised by Britain, Kano State became incorporated into the Northern Nigeria Protectorate of the British Empire in 1903. Since Nigeria gained independence from Britain in 1960, Kano State has established itself as a centre for industry, agriculture and Islamic banking. Today, the Hausa and Fulani make up a majority of the State's population. Hausa is, thus, the dominant language, although there is also a substantial number of Fulfulde speakers. Kano has lower literacy and education rates than the rest of the country, with only 54.6 per cent being literate and 46.1 per cent having no or incomplete primary education (Kingmakers, 2023). Other modern-day challenges that the region faces include attacks by the Islamist terrorist group Boko Haram, areligious violence and extreme poverty. Given its Muslim-majority population (in contrast to the Nepal study) and its high illiteracy rates, Kano State provides an interesting context to explore EME and gender.

## Constitution Day Secondary School and Madina Secondary School

The fieldwork took place in two secondary schools in Kano city, Kano State; Constitution Secondary School, which is English-medium and Madina Secondary School, which is a Hausa-medium (HME) Islamic School, to enable a comparison of how girls and boys fare in both<sup>14</sup>. The EME school has separate sections for boys and girls, each with a separate administration and their own principal, although they operate in the same quarters. The HME school, on the other hand, is mixed. Unlike the school investigated in the Nepal study, the EME and HME schools here are tuition free, although parents pay the Parent Teachers Association levy at the beginning of each session. The levy is relatively meagre, however, about one British pound. A further difference between the Nigerian and Nepali schools is that both schools in Nigeria have a common entrance examination. In other words, neither cohort has been pre-selected for their academic abilities. As is the case in Nepal, girls are underrepresented in EME in the year groups surveyed: 67 per cent are boys compared with 33 per cent girls. In the Hausa-medium Islamic school, the gender split is more equal, but still with an overrepresentation of boys: 58 per cent are boys compared with 42 per cent girls (see Table 14). National-level out-of-school rates for boys and girls are 29 per cent girls and 25 per cent boys at lower secondary level, and 34 per

	Boys	Girls
English-medium school	615 (67%)	301 (33%)
Hausa-medium school	300 (58%)	214 (42%)

**Table 14** Enrolment rates in Junior Secondary School, Year 3 (13–14 year olds) in the English- and Hausa-medium schools by gender

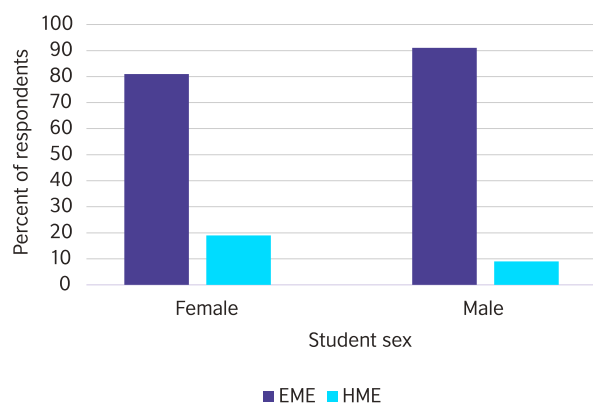
14. Pseudonyms are used to refer to the schools.

cent girls compared with 31 per cent boys at upper secondary level (UNICEF, 2022). As is the case in Nepal, gender differences in enrolment are at their most marked in EME.

## Questionnaire findings

### Medium of education preferences

Figure 5 shows students' responses to the question: 'Would you rather attend English-medium or Hausa-medium education?' with EME clearly preferable for both male and female students.



**Figure 5** Answers to: Would you rather attend EME or HME?

A linear regression analysis looks closer at the factors accounting for this pattern (Table 15). The difference between male and female students is minor, and despite male students having a stronger preference for EME overall, the vast majority of both male and female

students state a preference for EME. Interestingly, whether they were currently in EME or HME was irrelevant, which we can interpret as male and female students preferring EME across the board. It is noteworthy that this differs from Nepal, where the preference for EME was most pronounced among those who were already enrolled in EME, whether girls or boys. While this is still speculation, it may be that the overall clearer preference for EME in Nigeria could be due to generally higher levels of English language proficiency. Table 15 also shows that students with Hausa as their home language, while still having a stronger preference for EME overall, have a slightly weaker preference for EME compared to students with other home languages. It makes sense that students with Hausa as their home language would have a slightly weaker preference for EME, as the alternative is HME, where they get to use their home language in school.

### Self-rated language proficiency

This section looks at self-rated language proficiency in English, Hausa and the mother tongue. These questions used a scale of 1–5, with 1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest. Multiple regression analysis was conducted to establish which student characteristics had a bearing on self-rated language proficiency: sex, language stream and home language. As can be seen in Table 16, English proficiency and Hausa proficiency were statistically significant. Let's consider them in turn.

Predictor	Coefficient	Standard Error	P-value
Intercept	1	0.07	<0.001***
Female (vs Male)	-0.13	0.07	0.046*
EME (vs NME)	0.02	0.06	0.736
Hausa home language (vs other)	-0.15	0.07	0.028*

**Table 15** Multiple regression analysis for: If you had a choice, would you rather attend an English-medium or a Hausa-medium school?



Model Outcome	Intercept ( $\alpha$ )	F-statistic	R <sup>2</sup>	P
I rate my English	2.62	30 (3, 114)	0.44	< 0.001***
I rate my Hausa proficiency	3.76	6.72 (3, 114)	0.15	< 0.001***
I rate my mother tongue proficiency	3.48	1.88 (3, 112)	0.05	0.14

**Table 16** Multiple regression analysis for self-reported proficiency

Predictor	Coefficient	Standard Error	P-value
Intercept	2.62	0.20	< 0.001***
Female (vs Male)	-0.21	0.18	0.25
EME (vs HME)	1.60	0.19	< 0.001***
Hausa home language (vs other)	-0.41	0.18	0.027*

**Table 17** Multiple regression analysis for: I rate my English proficiency

As can be seen in Table 17, language stream and home language had a statistically significant bearing on self-rated English proficiency, with EME students significantly more likely to report higher English proficiency and students with Hausa as a home language significantly more likely to report lower English proficiency. That students in EME would report higher levels of English proficiency is not surprising, and coheres with findings from Nepal. It is likely to do with the greater exposure to English offered in EME, which may offer more opportunities for practise and also possibly boost confidence. Students with Hausa as a home language are more likely to report

lower English ability, despite the fact that they are spread across both the English- and the Hausa-medium school. This is likely because students with Hausa as a home language are less likely to use English and more likely to use Hausa to communicate outside of school, as Hausa is used as a lingua franca in Northern Nigeria.

We now turn to self-rated Hausa competence, which was also statistically significant (Table 18). The mean response to this question was 3.9. As can be seen in Table 18, female students were significantly more likely to report lower Hausa language proficiency than boys. It is not clear why this would be but it may be related to

Predictor	Coefficient	Standard Error	P-value
Intercept	3.76	0.23	< 0.001***
Female (vs Male)	-0.64	0.21	0.002**
EME (vs HME)	0.46	0.20	0.025*
Hausa home language (vs other)	0.40	0.21	0.06

**Table 18** Multiple regression analysis for: I rate my Hausa language proficiency

lower confidence, which has been shown in the literature to disproportionately affect girls. Furthermore, somewhat ironically, EME students were more likely to rate their national language ability higher than HME students. There could be a range of reasons for this; perhaps students in the EME stream are generally more confident, or their boosted confidence in English (see above) may also affect their confidence in Hausa. Finally, while only approximating statistical significance, having Hausa as a home language did have a small bearing on reporting higher proficiency in Hausa.

### Self-rated comprehension

Students were asked to self-rate their level of comprehension of the course content. The average score on the five-point scale for this question was 3.7. Multiple regression analysis showed that sex and language stream both had a statistically significant bearing on this answer, with female students more likely to report lower levels of comprehension, and EME students likely to report higher levels of comprehension.

Whether a student had Hausa or another language as a home language was irrelevant (Table 19).

The finding that female students report lower course content comprehension is reflected in the literature whereby girls, other things being equal, generally report lower confidence than boys. It is perhaps surprising that the EME students rate their understanding of the course content higher than HME students, as comprehension issues are often said to be a main concern in EME. Again, this is a reminder that medium of education is not the sole factor determining comprehension, but intersects with other factors, including confidence and self-esteem. It is also a reminder that HME education is not devoid of comprehension difficulties since many students have home languages other than Hausa. This is further confirmed by another question which asked specifically about students' difficulties in understanding the content because of the medium of education (see Table 20). A multiple regression analysis showed that no particular group characteristic had a statistically significant bearing on lesser or greater

Predictor	Coefficient	Standard Error	P-value
Intercept	3.32	0.17	< 0.001***
Female (vs Male)	-0.34	0.16	0.03*
EME (vs HME)	1.03	0.15	< 0.001***
Hausa home language (vs other)	0.13	0.16	0.40

**Table 19** Multiple regression analysis for: I understand the course content myself

Predictor	Coefficient	Standard Error	P-value
Intercept	0.69	0.15	< 0.001*
Female (vs Male)	0.01	0.13	0.94
HME (vs EME)	0.14	0.19	0.46
Hausa home language (vs other)	-0.06	0.18	0.76
HME and Hausa home language	-0.18	0.26	0.49

**Table 20** Multiple regression analysis for: Do you have any difficulties in understanding the content of any subject areas because of the language of instruction being used in your classroom?

difficulties; on the contrary, comprehension difficulties are present across the board for all students. Although non-significant, students at the HME school were more likely to report more difficulties.

## Work outside education

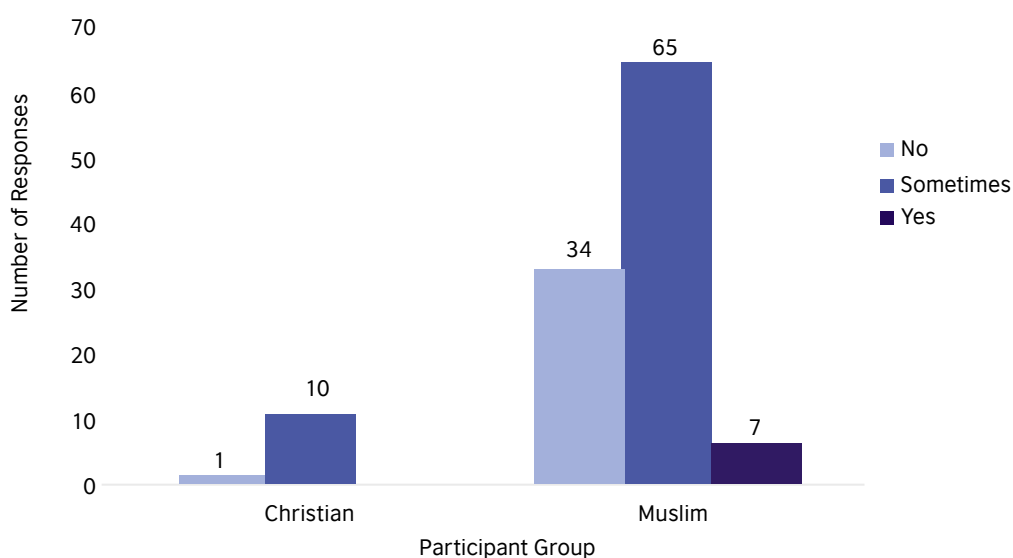
The questionnaire also sought to establish the extent to which requirements to work outside of their studies, whether in a paid or unpaid capacity, impact differentially on girls' and boys' educational opportunities. This question had three answers which, to be analysed quantitatively, were converted to numbers: 0 (no), 1 (sometimes), and 2 (yes). Overall, 56 per cent of female students and 60 per cent of male students responded either 'sometimes' or 'yes' to this question. Multiple linear regression was used to test whether gender, language stream, or religion significantly predicted whether students reported having to work/earn money to support themselves or their family, but this was not statistically significant. This differs from Nepal, where students in the NME stream were on the whole more likely to have to work outside of their study. In Nepal, this was

explained by the NME students coming from lower socio-economic classes, which may not reflect the pattern in Nigeria. However, in Nigeria, there is another class-based educational difference, namely that between privately and publicly educated children.

## Gender, ethnic and religious marginalisation

Finally, the questionnaire sought to establish the extent to which religious/ethnic minorities are included in the teaching. Figure 6 shows responses to the question: Has any of your teachers ever included discussion of your culture in the course content? divided by religion. Within our sample, only 11 students identified as Christian compared with 106 who identified as Muslim. Only one of 11 Christian students reported 'no', compared with 34 of 106 Muslim students. It is difficult to draw any conclusions from these findings precisely because Christian students are so few. Open-ended responses to the questionnaire reveal further insights into challenges for minorities.

Has any of your teachers ever included discussion of your culture (for example, your religion/language) in the course content?



**Figure 6** Answers to: Has any of your teachers ever included discussion of your culture in the course content?

In response to the open-ended question: Do certain groups of students (girls, religious minorities, etc.) face particular challenges and, if so, what are the challenges? only one student in the EME school responded 'yes', whereas in

the HME school many more replied 'yes'. The type of challenges reported relate to minority tribes and ethnicities that are stigmatised by other students:

## Challenges for minorities

*Sometimes, students from one ethnic make jest of other students from a different ethnic group.*  
**(Girl in Hausa-medium school with Hausa as home language)**

*Sometimes students make jest of me because I am Fulani.*  
**(Girl in Hausa-medium school with Fulani as home language)**

*Some students make fun of me because I am Kanuri.*  
**(Girl in Hausa-medium school with Kanuri as home language)**

*Some Fulani students are made fun of by other students.*  
**(Girl in Hausa-medium school with Tuareg as home language)**

*Sometimes other students make jest of the Fulani calling them kidnappers.*  
**(Girl in Hausa-medium school with Hausa as home language)**

*At first I was stigmatised because I am Buzuwa by tribe.*  
**(Girl in Hausa-medium school with Tuareg as home language)**

*Sometimes when my friends speak Fulani and I don't understand what they are saying, they laugh at me.*  
**(Girl in Hausa-medium school with Hausa as home language)**

## General challenges for girls and boys

*In some situations, boys are given preferential treatment. Sometimes those who cannot speak English are looked down upon.*  
**(Boy in Hausa-medium school with Hausa as home language)**

*Some boys do not have enough time to study like the girls.*  
**(Boy in Hausa-medium school with Hausa as home language)**

*Some students do not have learning materials and some do not come to school every day.*  
**(Boy in Hausa-medium school with Hausa as home language)**

## Language-based challenges

*As a kanuri, there are some Hausa words that I cannot pronounce properly and students make jest of me when I pronounce them.*  
**(Girl in Hausa-medium school with Kanuri as home language)**

*When we came to Kano newly, we were made fun of because we cannot speak Hausa well.*  
**(Girl in Hausa-medium school with Nupe as home language)**

*Some students face difficulty because they cannot understand English.*  
**(Boy in Hausa-medium school with Hausa as home language)**

*I face challenge in interacting with my friends because I don't speak Hausa very well.*  
**(Girl in Hausa-medium school with Yoruba as home language)**

Most remarks about challenges for minorities relate to stigmatisation of ethnic and tribal groups. Here it is interesting to note that such comments, with the exception of one remark, are absent in the English-medium school but prominent in the Hausa-medium school. This may be because, despite its colonial legacy, English serves as a more neutral lingua franca that does not favour any particular ethnic or tribal group. This is confirmed by participants during the interviews. Language-related challenges are also reported, but they apply to both English and Hausa. General challenges for girls and boys are also noted. Marginalisation is a complex issue, which can usefully be investigated through a broad range of data sources. We will return to this issue in the sections Interview findings and Classroom observations. Diary extracts also yield further insights into girls' and boys' challenges.

# Interview findings

## Attitudes towards medium of education and gender

### Positive attitudes towards EME

English is intrinsically embedded in Nigerian society and attitudes towards English are overwhelmingly positive. For many years, English has been the official language of Nigeria and it is used in all official contexts, from governance and education to law courts and mass media. Its status as a lingua franca also means that it aids communication and helps build a sense of unity across a linguistically and ethnically diverse country. Positive attitudes towards English, as well as beliefs that it is an essential language to learn, are reflected in the responses of all interviewees, whether from EME or HME backgrounds, who outline its importance for communication both within and outside of Nigeria:

*You know, English is very important for children to learn. If she cannot speak English, how would she be able to communicate with others when she goes out?*

**(Parent 6, female, EME, Nigeria)**

*[English] would help me to communicate and enjoy the spirit of brotherhood with people that I cannot speak their native languages.*

**(Student 2, male, EME, Nigeria)**

*If they understand English, they will be able to communicate with other people wherever they go, because even within the country there are different languages.*

**(Teacher 6, male, EME, Nigeria)**

*English is among the widely spoken languages in the world. Anywhere you go, you will be able to communicate with others, if you can speak English.*

**(Principal 3, male, HME, Nigeria)**

It is important to note, however, that most participants also emphasise the equal importance of Hausa for communication:

*The two languages (Hausa and English) would help me in communicating with my patients after I have become a medical doctor. I can use English to speak to those that cannot understand Hausa.*

**(Student 3, male, EME, Nigeria)**

*Both English and Hausa are important. If I become a nurse, I will be able to communicate with Doctors and colleagues in English.*

**(Student 7, female, EME, Nigeria)**

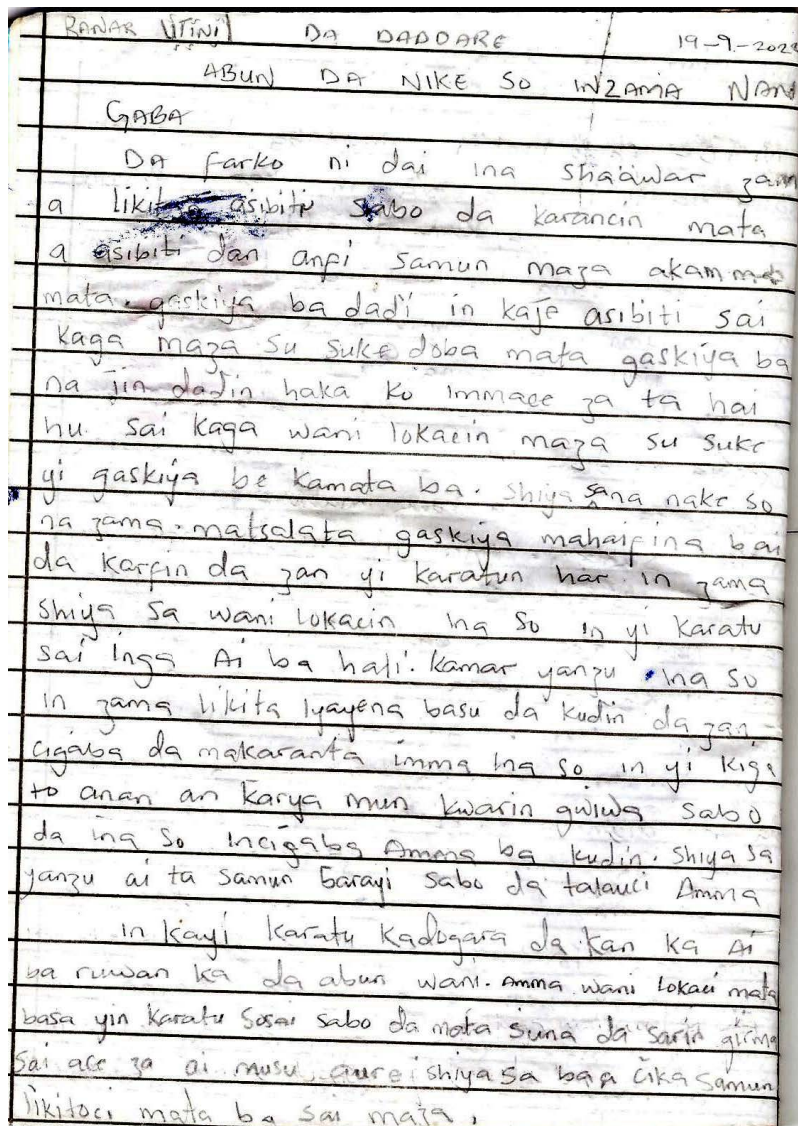
*The two languages will help me in achieving my ambition both locally and internationally.*

**(Student 8, female, HME, Nigeria)**

**Amina** (girl) wants to become a doctor as there is a shortage of female doctors and she does not think it is appropriate for male doctors to deliver babies. She understands how important education is, especially for girls; however, her parents are not financially buoyant enough to support her to further her studies. She writes: ‘this is demotivating me already. Poverty causes increase in crime rate but if one studies and becomes independent one can never engage in criminal activities.’ At the moment, not all her siblings go to school.

Many participants also specifically highlight the fact that English is an official language, which makes its study worthwhile. Parent 9 (**male, EME, Nigeria**) makes this clear:

*Although we have three major national languages in Nigeria (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba), we cannot adopt any one of them as an official language, due to the heterogeneous nature of the country, so I will prefer my sister to attend an English medium school.*



**Figure 7** Extract from Amina's diary (in Hausa)

This is also of particular importance to the policymakers who see English as a 'unifying language' that provides a way of communicating 'without any claim to tribal consideration' (**Policymaker 1, male**). This view of the role of English as a unifying language is less widespread in Nepal, which does not have the same colonial history. Like Parent 9, **Policymaker 2 (male)** thinks that English is 'our only option, considering the heterogeneous nature of our country'.

Across participants, the greater educational and career opportunities offered by English are

also seen as significant. Participants repeatedly emphasise the fact that university-level education is delivered in English and that a solid base for both boys and girls is, thus, essential now:

*Even here, at home if I go to the university and I don't understand English, there will be problem.*

**(Student 7, female, HME, Nigeria)**

*English will help me in my university education because that is the language used for teaching and communication in the university.*

**(Student 9, male, HME, Nigeria)**

*In the university, nobody will translate into their local language for them.*

**(Principal 2, female, EME, Nigeria)**

As in Nepal, English is also associated with particular career aspirations, which in turn are gendered. For example, students express specific career goals that require a strong level of English to achieve, such as medicine, law, teaching, broadcasting and journalism:

*English language would help me to learn the content of my favourite subject, because I want to become a medical doctor and speak English very well.*

**(Student 4, male, EME, Nigeria)**

HME students worry, however, that not attending an EME school will hinder their ability to achieve this career goal. This seems to be a particular problem among girls:

*I would like to attend an English medium school because I want to become a doctor in future and without learning English, I don't think I can achieve my dream.*

**(Student 4, female, HME, Nigeria)**

*I would like to attend an English-medium school because I want to become a medical doctor, when I grow up.*

**(Student 5, female, HME, Nigeria)**

It is interesting to note that EME is seen as an important way to develop 'better English'. There is little consideration of the possibility that developing English language proficiency might also be done through learning English as a subject. Instead, EME comes to be seen as a shortcut to attaining greater success in life for both boys and girls. It may be that the greater exposure to English obtained through EME is seen as important to developing the level of English proficiency that is deemed necessary for securing the dream job.

Teacher 5 (**female, EME, Nigeria**) describes English as providing students 'with many opportunities in life' and Student 1 (**male, HME, Nigeria**) considers English essential 'to become successful in future'. Some EME parents even try to speak English with their children as much

as possible at home to embed the language in their everyday life. However, there is also widespread recognition among parents that Hausa is equally important:

*I want my son to be good in both our local language and the English language, because the two would help him in the future, both within the country and outside.*

**(Parent 4, male, EME, Nigeria)**

*All these languages are useful to the future of my child. The local languages have their roles, while English also has its role, in the future of my child.*

**(Parent 5, male, EME, Nigeria)**

For EME students and teachers, as well as principals, the greater cultural diversity of the EME classroom is particularly valued. While HME schools are understandably made up of predominantly Hausa people, EME schools have students from Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo and other backgrounds, which is seen as important for harmony, learning and cultural understanding:

*I decided to send him to this school because of the diversity of the school [...] I want him to know how to live with other people with different cultures and traditions, so that they would learn from one other.*

**(Parent 1, female, EME, Nigeria)**

*What I like about it is that mingling and interacting with students from diverse background gives me more experience, in terms of the way I would teach them.*

**(Teacher 1, female, EME, Nigeria)**

*We can call the school a federation because there are students from different ethnic groups such as Hausa, Yoruba, Fulfulde and others.*

**(Principal 1, male, EME, Nigeria)**

## Negative attitudes towards EME

Across both EME and HME groups, there are very few negative attitudes expressed towards EME. Any concerns come exclusively from parents and tend to centre on three core



issues: loss of proficiency in the mother tongue, lack of understanding of content and the legacy of colonialism.

Parent 5 (**male, EME, Nigeria**), for example, worries about the fact that ‘when you are employed at the local government or state level, you need to understand the local language’. A focus on English at school, thus, could affect students’ understanding of Hausa and cause problems when applying for local government jobs.

For Parent 1 (**male, HME, Nigeria**), the issue is more one of comprehension: ‘If you take your child to a school that gives instruction in another language, that means the child has to learn the language before he/she can understand what is taught’. In other words, students are faced with a dual task of learning both a new language and new content at the same time, which can limit academic achievement.

Parent 9 (**male, EME, Nigeria**), on the other hand, is uncomfortable about the link between English and Nigeria’s colonial past, and expresses a desire for one of Nigeria’s local languages to be adopted as an official language instead: ‘I wish we have one local language in Nigeria which can be adopted as a national language. I would have preferred our children to be taught in a local language’.

## Positive attitudes towards HME

As Hausa is the predominant language in Kano and serves as an important lingua franca across Northern Nigeria, it is unsurprising then that attitudes are generally very positive towards learning Hausa. Across the HME and EME groups, interviewees overwhelmingly state that learning Hausa makes it easier to communicate in everyday life, whether navigating local society or at home with family. Several students also recognise that Hausa is useful for interacting with people who do not speak English (‘I can come across people that don’t understand English, so I have to talk to them in my local language’ – **Student 1, male,**

**HME, Nigeria**). In a classroom scenario, Principal 3 (**male, HME, Nigeria**) finds Hausa beneficial for bringing together ‘students from other ethnic groups’.

There is also strong recognition among participants that Hausa is increasingly growing in status in Nigeria and that it has an equal place alongside English:

*Hausa is an important language in Africa; that is why we think Hausa should be developed, because in some cases it is growing side by side with English in Nigeria.*

**(Parent 7, male, HME, Nigeria)**

*We want her to understand both English and Hausa properly. Knowing how to speak the two languages is better than for her to understand only one.*

**(Parent 5, female, HME, Nigeria)**

*English and Hausa have roles to play in my future ambition. English is used to teach me in school, but I use Hausa to communicate with everyone outside the school, because everyone here understands Hausa.*

**(Student 6, female, EME, Nigeria)**

Parents in particular believe that Hausa will play an important role in their children’s future and help them achieve their ambitions. Nonetheless, there is a persistent association between speaking Hausa and having a lower level of education:

*Learning English helps in communicating with people in places, like the hospital, school or even in the street, because he will meet people that do not understand Hausa.*

*Learning local languages, on the other hand, will help my son to communicate with local people that are not educated.*

**(Parent 3, female, HME, Nigeria)**

For many, another major benefit of HME schools is that the content and language is much easier to understand for students. In fact, parents state that this is the principal reason why they send their children to such schools rather than other factors, such as gender or financial constraints:

*I chose to send him to a HME school, because, being a Hausa native speaker, he can understand well what they teach him in the school.*

**(Parent 1, male, HME, Nigeria)**

*I sent her to a Hausa-medium school, because I want her to understand what is taught in the school very well.*

**(Parent 4, male, HME, Nigeria)**

*The opportunity is that she can use her understanding of her mother tongue to comprehend what she is taught in school.*

**(Parent 6, male, HME, Nigeria)**

Equally, students acknowledge that they perform much better in HME schools because of their prior knowledge of Hausa:

*Hausa help me understand the subjects better because sometimes when I am taught in English, I don't understand until I am taught in Hausa.*

**(Student 1, male, HME, Nigeria)**

*Hausa will help me more because sometimes I don't understand lessons that are taught in English unless they are explained to me in Hausa.*

**(Student 4, female, HME, Nigeria)**

*Hausa language helps me because I understand lessons better when I am taught in Hausa.*

**(Student 9, male, HME, Nigeria)**

Likewise, teachers think that they are more efficient when teaching in their native tongue:

*As a teacher, I find it easier to effectively present my lessons through the local language medium. The students too, demonstrate better understanding when they are taught in Hausa.*

**(Teacher 4, female, HME, Nigeria)**

*Teaching through the local language medium gives me the opportunity to convey my message to the students effectively.*

**(Teacher 5, male, HME, Nigeria)**

For both parents and teachers, access to HME education provides students with the

opportunity to learn more about their culture and, thus, develop their sense of cultural identity:

*In the Hausa-medium school the child will learn about her culture and give importance to it. She will also learn a lot about her language, unlike in an English-medium school.*

**(Parent 5, female, HME, Nigeria)**

*The opportunities are that we expose them to reading Hausa story books and watching Hausa film. All these will enhance their knowledge of Hausa grammar and literature.*

**(Teacher 3, male, HME, Nigeria)**

As participants generally recognise the equal status and importance of Hausa alongside English, there are very few negative attitudes towards HME.

## Attitudes towards other local languages

As previously stated, the vast majority of inhabitants in Kano State have Hausa as their mother tongue. Nonetheless, there is still a number of other local languages commonly used in the community, particularly Fulfulde, Yoruba, Bura, Igbira and Kanuri. Generally, attitudes towards these local languages are highly positive, with interviewees recognising their importance in Nigerian society:

*I speak my native language, because it is also very important for my children, so that they will be able to communicate with my relatives when we visit my hometown.*

**(Parent 6, female, EME, Nigeria)**

*At home, we speak our native language, Bura, except if there are visitors around who do not understand the language; then we speak the language they understand, either Hausa or English. As a Bura girl, if she doesn't understand the language, she will not be able to communicate with her relatives and other people from the same ethnic group.*

**(Parent 9, male, EME, Nigeria)**

*Igbira will help me interact with my family members.*

**(Student 9, male, HME, Nigeria)**

Related to family ties is the significance of local languages to cultural identity, with parents in particular stating that it can help children to better understand their ethnicity.

In terms of negative attitudes, the only comments by participants relate to the fact that

local languages are ‘confined’ or only ‘understood in a small area’ (**Parent 4, male, EME, Nigeria**), which restricts children’s ability to communicate with others both within and outside of Nigeria.

## Obstacles to accessing and participating in EME/HME

Despite the generally positive attitudes towards both EME and HME in Nigeria, participants mentioned a range of obstacles that can hinder access and participation for students. These obstacles are both internal (i.e. related to limitations within a schooling context) and external (i.e. related to limitations on a broader societal or political level).

### Internal obstacles

By far, the biggest internal obstacle for students in EME settings is lack of competence in the medium of education. Parents, students and teachers alike all point out that, as English is not the students’ mother tongue, it is difficult for them to understand the content of lessons:

*English is not our mother tongue; we learn it, so there must be challenges. No matter what, some things will be difficult to her, because it is not her mother tongue; and most of the times, she speaks her native language.*

**(Parent 9, male, EME, Nigeria)**

*The challenge I face is that some of the students do not understand English well and the challenge of those students is that they do not understand the lesson very well.*

**(Teacher 1, female, EME, Nigeria)**

Teachers believe that lack of competence in English is a particular problem for students with Hausa as a mother tongue because they generally attended HME primary schools and tend to speak only Hausa at home:

*They find it difficult to communicate in English, because they did not have good background in English, as some of them attended Hausa medium schools at the primary school level [...] Students from other ethnic groups find it easier to communicate in English, because most of them speak English at home.*

**(Teacher 4, male, EME, Nigeria)**

*Those from other ethnic groups that speak English at home, and some that attended private primary schools, communicate in English better than those who attended public school.*

**(Teacher 5, female, EME, Nigeria)**

*They often do not have adequate background in English, because most of them attend public primary schools where Hausa language is used to teach and they hardly speak English outside the classroom.*

**(Teacher 6, male, EME, Nigeria)**

Even in HME settings, parents are keen to highlight the challenges of learning English for their children, thereby justifying the choice to send them to an HME secondary school:

*The nursery and primary schools she attended were EME schools and we have seen how hard she struggled to learn the language of instruction and to understand the lesson taught, as well.*

**(Parent 6, male, HME, Nigeria)**

*In the English-medium school they are taught in a language they don't normally speak, so they cannot understand what is taught.*

**(Parent 10, male, HME, Nigeria)**

Teachers in HME schools also emphasise the difficulties of teaching English to Hausa native speakers, but recognise that limited English is a major barrier to girls' success in life:

*That is why our girls do not go far in their education because they cannot speak English or understand English well. In this sense, English has become detrimental to the progress of our girls.*

**(Teacher 2, male, HME, Nigeria)**

Shyness is also another factor that can impede learning in both EME and HME settings. Teachers recognise that this is a problem specific to girls because of their cultural upbringing:

*One of the challenges for the girls in school is that they are always shy to speak out in the class, especially when they could not pronounce the English words properly. That inhibition in them prevents them from learning to speak English well.*

**(Teacher 2, male, EME, Nigeria)**

*As you can see, this is a co-education school and some girls do not feel comfortable in the presence of boys. Even in the class, some girls don't like talking or participating in class activities together with boys unless the teacher insists and this affects their learning.*

**(Teacher 4, female, HME, Nigeria)**

*I think the boys are more outspoken and feel free to ask questions or participate in classroom activities, unlike some of the girls who are shy and don't feel free to participate in the class.*

**(Teacher 6, male, EME, Nigeria)**

Even at break time, girls feel unable to relax around boys. As Teacher 2 (**male, HME, Nigeria**) explains: 'At school the girls are not comfortable during break time, as they want to play around and enjoy themselves but the presence of the boys would not allow them to do that'.

Another major barrier in both EME and HME settings is the shortage of textbooks and other teaching and learning materials. This seems to be a bone of contention between parents and teachers, with parents blaming schools for failing to provide their children with adequate resources and teachers blaming parents for not buying the necessary textbooks for their children:

*The children do not have textbooks; and you know textbooks help students to learn better.*

**(Parent 6, female, EME, Nigeria)**

*We are trying our best to provide learning materials for our children, but we hope government and other well to do individuals will also assist in providing more teaching and learning materials for the school.*

**(Parent 8, female, EME, Nigeria)**

*On the part of the students, some of their parents do frustrate them by not providing them with the necessary learning facility.*

**(Teacher 3, male, EME, Nigeria)**

*Their parents are not helping matters as they normally do not buy English textbooks for the students.*

**(Teacher 1, male, HME, Nigeria)**

In addition to a shortage of textbooks, another practical issue that particularly affects HME schools is a lack of teachers, which often results in overcrowded classrooms:

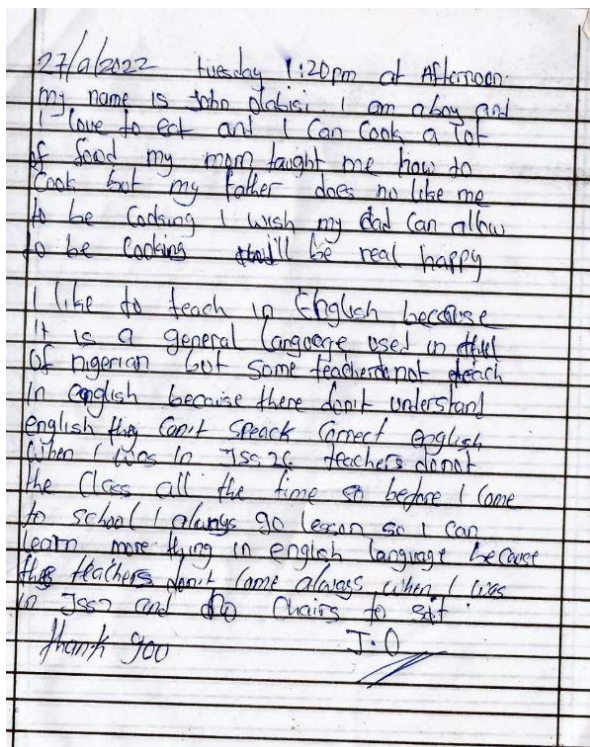
*We have adequate classrooms but because there are no teachers, many students are combined in one class. Therefore, the class is overcrowded.*

**(Student 4, female, HME, Nigeria)**

*As you can see, we have classrooms but teachers are inadequate.* **(Teacher 6, male, HME, Nigeria)**

*It is not their fault but [...] the teachers are not enough and even the few available do not have enough knowledge to teach the students properly.*

**(Teacher 2, male, HME, Nigeria)**

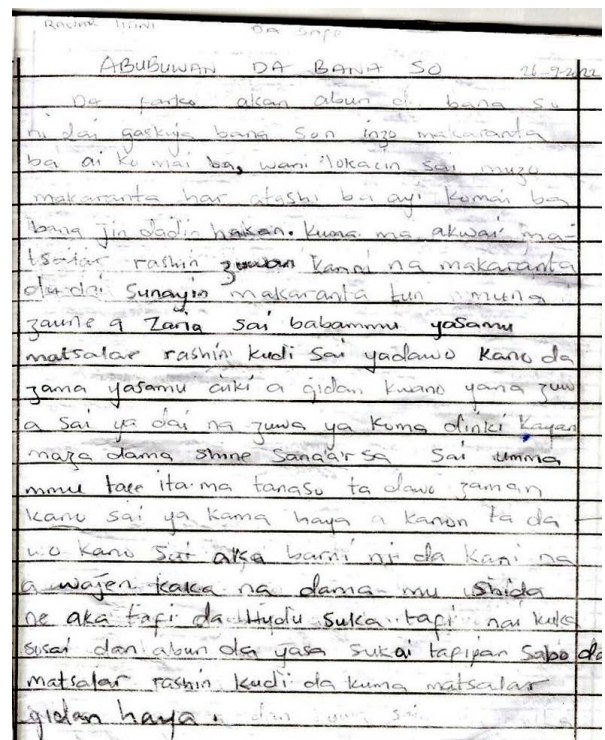


**Figure 8** Extract from Adam's diary (English-medium school) highlighting some of the challenges he faces around teachers' English abilities

Additionally, teacher absenteeism is a big issue.

**Saffiya** (Figure 9) writes about the house chores she has to do, which leaves her little time for homework. She tells of teachers being absent and not showing up after the lunch break, dismissing the class after half a day.

**Saffiya** has far to go to school and will normally try to hail a tricycle; however, when none is available, she walks. One day she trekked all the way to school only to find that no teacher ever came and that she had wasted a whole day. She comments on teacher shortages and that some subjects like Civic Education and Agricultural Science were not taught since the teachers on Teaching Practice finished and left. She writes about there not being water in the school to drink nor in the toilets and how the classroom is overcrowded.



**Figure 9** Extract from Saffiya's diary (in Hausa)

## External obstacles

### Early marriage

For girls, a major obstacle to accessing and participating in education is early marriage, which leads to school dropout. This is mentioned by teachers, principals and policymakers:

*The greatest challenge is the issue of dropout of the girls. Some girls are pulled out of school in JSS 1 or 2 and married off. We had cases of students who were married off in JSS 2, at the age of 13 or 14.*

**(Teacher 4, male, EME, Nigeria)**

*Their biggest challenge is marriage. At the primary school, the girls are so young then, so all they know is their studies. But by the time they reach Junior secondary school, then the issue of marriage starts coming to their ears either from their parents or from their friends.*

**(Teacher 1, male, HME, Nigeria)**

*Outside the school, the biggest challenges for the girls is the issue of marriage. In the 3 years I spent in this school about 10 girls were withdrawn for marriage. Some in JS 1, some JS 2 and many at JS 3. There is a girl at JS 1 that came to me and complained that her parents would get her married and I think I stopped seeing her from that day.*

**(Teacher 2, male, HME, Nigeria)**

*The biggest challenges for girls is the issue of marriage. Girls can be withdrawn at [any time] like a girl I taught in my former school. The girl is very intelligent and bright. All of a sudden, her father withdrew her from school and got her married at the age of 16. How I wish the father would have allowed her to obtain her certificate. I know the girl would have done very well in her education.*

**(Teacher 3, male, HME, Nigeria)**

**Aisaht** (girl) comments in her diary on early marriage. She writes: 'Girls grows older more quickly than boys, which is why they are always married off and not being given the opportunity to pursue education up to a higher level'.

Among parents, there is an expectation that girls should find a husband as soon as possible, even if this disrupts their studies, and that it will then be the husband's responsibility to decide whether she continues her education or not:

*The girl might get married immediately after her secondary education and the decision whether to go for further education and where to go, will be between her and her husband.*

**(Parent 10, female, EME, Nigeria)**

*Most of my children are boys and my first child is a girl, who is already married, which brought the end of her education, except if her husband can teach her.*

**(Parent 2, male, HME, Nigeria)**

*My daughter's education could stop at any time she gets a husband that would marry her.*

**(Parent 10, male, HME, Nigeria)**

Family beliefs concerning gender also play a major role in education choices. Many parents

recognise that, while they want to educate both their sons and daughters, boys' education is ultimately more important:

*In my family, even though we attach importance to education generally, that is both western and Islamic education, the education of boys is considered more serious than that of the girls.*

**(Parent 3, male, EME, Nigeria)**

*Although I sent my boys and girls to school, there are certain investments I can make on my son's education, which I cannot do for my daughter's. This is because there are certain levels of education, which I would allow my daughter to attain, but for my son I can allow him to go to any level.*

**(Parent 4, male, EME, Nigeria)**

*For a boy, he doesn't have a limit to his education. He can reach any level he wants to.*

**(Parent 10, female, HME, Nigeria)**

For Teacher 5 (**male, HME, Nigeria**), 'the challenge begins from home' because 'some parents feel that western education is not important for girls'. This is a view shared by Principal 3 (**male, HME, Nigeria**) and Policymaker 1, who believe that 'some parents do not value girls' education' and that 'girls' education should not go beyond a certain level', respectively.

One boy even believes that his father's attitudes towards education is a sign that he 'likes' him more than his sisters:

*My father treats me differently from my sisters. He said he will give me anything I want, if I go to school every day. That is why I come to school always. I think my father likes me more than my sisters because, even when we were in primary school, he sent me to a private school but sent my sisters to a government school. I guess it is because I am a boy and my sisters are girls. Yes, the boys go to English-medium school, while the girls go to Hausa-medium school.*

**(Student 10, male, HME, Nigeria)**

Such views on the greater importance of education for boys than girls coexist with views that education is highly important for girls.

### Household responsibilities

As is the case in Nepal, both EME and HME students face considerable responsibilities outside of school, which affect their ability to study. Parents expect both boys and girls to play an active role in household chores. This contrasts with Nepal, where it was mainly the girls doing household chores (however, Nepali boys typically run errands). Although both boys and girls are expected to play an active role in household chores, the type of chores carried out tend to be guided by traditional gender expectations:

*He helps his mother with some house chores, like sweeping or fetching water in the morning, since he goes to school in the afternoon.*

**(Parent 5, male, EME, Nigeria)**

*In the morning after she performs the early morning prayers, she will greet her parents; then she will sweep and wash the plates we used the previous night [...] Sometimes she prepares breakfast for the family. She is the one that helps take care of her younger brothers and sisters when I go out to work.*

**(Parent 6, female, EME, Nigeria)**

*The kind of training I receive at home is different from that of the boys. I am being taught how to cook, take care of my younger ones and take care of the home generally.*

**(Student 7, female, HME, Nigeria)**

While students generally do not complain and see chores as a matter-of-fact part of their daily life, some parents admit that such chores can limit children's time to study:

*When I wake up, I pray, wash plates and help my mother to cook, because she goes to work. I wash my brothers' clothes. I do all these and finish before 12.30 pm and leave for school.*

**(Student 6, female, EME, Nigeria)**

*To tell you the truth, he doesn't have enough time to study at home. As the breadwinner of the house, I normally work outside to earn a living for the family. Their mother engages them in different house chores, because the work is too much for her.*

**(Parent 1, male, HME, Nigeria)**

**Motunrayo** (girl) writes about household chores and how they affect her studies in a negative way: 'I have finished all my domestic chores for the day and I brought out my Basic Technology and English books and did the assignment, as well as studied thoroughly before going to bed. House chores affect my studies in a negative way. Immediately I come home from school, without resting, I am made to sweep the entire house and do the dishes before resting. The thoughts alone distract me from class.'

Many boys and girls also carry out additional courses or attend Qur'anic schools before or after school, which cuts into their study time:

*At 8:00am, he gets ready and goes to a Computer Centre, where he learns how to operate computers [...] After school, he goes to an Islamic school and afterwards he comes back home to do his assignment at night.*

**(Parent 1, female, EME, Nigeria)**

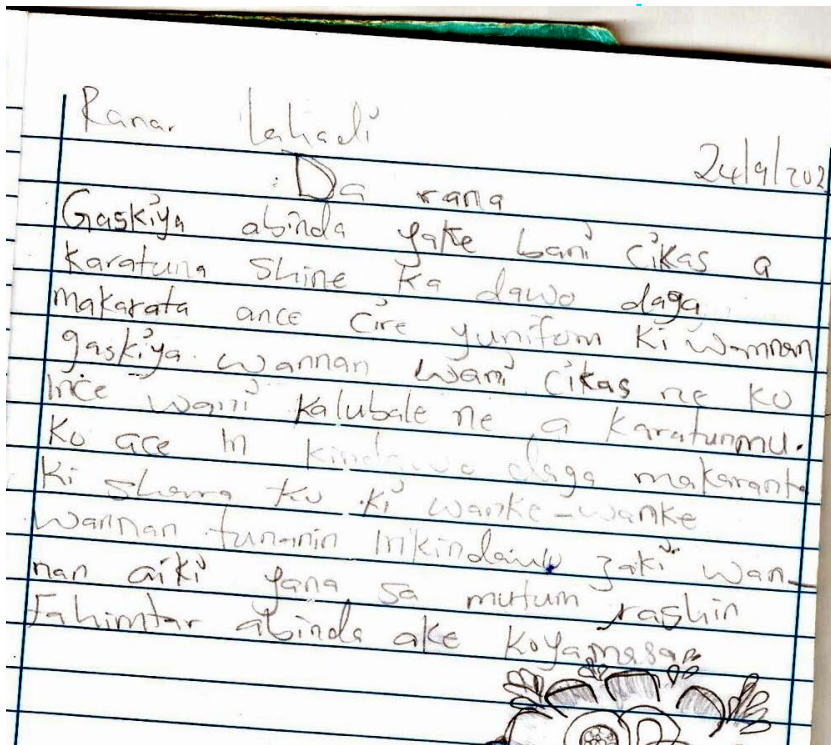
*After school, I would go home and get ready for another school at night; I would attend a Qur'anic school for two hours.*

**(Student 3, male, EME, Nigeria)**

*I go to the tailoring school in the morning, before coming to school in the afternoon.*

**(Student 11, female, EME, Nigeria)**

There appear to be some gender differences in that many boys have a paid part-time job to support their families, which poses an additional challenge to studying. Boys tend to carry out paid work in shops, markets, pharmacies or workshops, help out in the family business or undertake apprenticeships as mechanics or tailors:



**Figure 10** Extract from Motunrayo's diary (in Hausa)

*I work to support my family and myself. I support them by earning money from my shop and giving some of the money to my mother for the family maintenance.*

**(Student 3, male, EME, Nigeria)**

*Yes, I work to support my family. I work in a glass and aluminium workshop usually during the weekends. When I get paid, I give the money to my parents to keep it for me. If they want to use the money, they inform me before taking it.* **(Student 5, male, EME, Nigeria)**

Teachers point out that boys are often required to fund their own education through jobs as parents are reluctant to let their daughters work and, thus, prefer to use their money to invest in girls' education:

*For the boys, they usually have to go to the market or other places to buy and sell items, in order to sponsor their education, because their parents do not buy learning materials for their studies.*

**(Teacher 3, male, EME, Nigeria)**

*As for the boys, they can engage in any kind of commercial activities in order to get some money to support their education.*

**(Teacher 4, female, HME, Nigeria)**

Parents and students also openly acknowledge this situation:

*However, because of the economic situation in the country the male child can afford to sponsor himself through engaging in menial jobs.* **(Parent 1, male, HME, Nigeria)**

*My brother would agree to forfeit many things for me, because being a girl, I cannot go out and sell anything to get money.*

**(Student 8, female, HME, Nigeria)**

Teachers and principals believe that there is a strong link between boys working and both truancy and dropout, pointing out that when boys start earning money, they no longer see the need or have the time to attend school. In some cases, parents in need of more money may even encourage this behaviour:



*Some of the boys are truants. We have to call parents to ask why they are not in school and most of the times they give flimsy excuses.*

**(Teacher 6, male, HME, Nigeria)**

Putting the above factors together – household chores, additional school/courses and part-time work – it is clear that daily life can be extremely busy and hard for both boys and girls in the two government schools in Nigeria.

### **Medium of education and socio-economic background**

Compared with Nepal, where the choice between EME and NME is partly economically motivated, in Nigeria, this is not the case as both the EME and the HME schools are free of charge. However, during interviews, EME is often conflated and referred to interchangeably as private school education. Thus, another challenge to access and participate in EME, at least when offered by the private sector, is financial constraint:

*I attended an English-medium school in my primary school. But now, my father cannot afford to send all us there.*

**(Student 2, male, HME, Nigeria)**

*Because of the economic situation now, my father cannot afford to send us to such schools.*

**(Student 6, female, HME, Nigeria)**

*My younger siblings used to attend an English medium school which is a private school but they were withdrawn and taken to a public school because my parents couldn't pay the fees.*

**(Student 7, female, HME, Nigeria)**

The teachers, principals and policymakers believe that this poverty has a particularly detrimental effect on girls whose education is often sacrificed over boys:

*The biggest challenge is poverty. Some parents are reluctant to take their daughters to school because of poverty; they cannot afford to cater for their daughters' school needs. Therefore, the girls are more at risk of dropping out or not going beyond the junior secondary school.*

**(Teacher 4, female, HME, Nigeria)**

*The biggest challenge is economic. Due to the poverty of the parents some girls don't go beyond the secondary school, because the parents cannot afford to send them to the university or tertiary institution. In fact, some don't even finish the secondary school. They drop out along the way, like in JSS3, SS1 or SS2.*

**(Principal 2, female, EME, Nigeria)**

*Some parents feel they would rather spend their meagre resources in educating the boys than the girls [...] In Hausa communities, so long as the girls can overcome the challenge of poverty [...] they can move forward and progress in their education without any hindrance.*

**(Policymaker 1)**

If private-school EME is off-limits for girls from poorer backgrounds, offering EME in government schools can be perceived as offering the next best thing.

# Classroom observations

Classroom observations focused on actual teaching practices with regard to language use and the engagement of girls in the classroom.

## Official versus de facto English-medium education

As is the case in Nepal, the Nigerian classrooms observed are also considerably more multilingual than the medium of education policy might suggest. This applies regardless of whether the medium of education is English or Hausa and across all subjects observed.

Typically, the main language used by the teacher and students is the official one, so English in both the girls' and boys' EME schools (up to 80 per cent in some classes) and Hausa in the HME school; however, other languages are also used. In the EME schools, English is typically used for whole-class teaching while Hausa is used for rapport-building and for further explaining concepts or terms to students. In the lessons on Islamic Studies in the EME school, Hausa was also used for referring to and explaining some religious concepts, while English was used in Computer Science in the HME school to refer to and explain computer terms. As emerged from the interviews, most students in the EME school understand better when things are explained in Hausa, so it is natural and positive that both teachers and students make use of a language that's better understood when this is needed.

According to the fieldnotes, translanguaging practices appear to be less prevalent when the subject taught is a language. For instance, the English lesson in the EME boys' school was taught predominantly in English, whereas the Hausa and Arabic lessons in the HME school were taught predominantly in Hausa and

Arabic, respectively. French lessons in the girls' EME school, however, were more extensively multilingual, with French being used for the whole class and English and Hausa to provide support and scaffold, possibly because competence in French is less elevated than Hausa or Arabic. In comparison with Nepal, where the regional language Bhojpuri is sometimes used in and outside of the classroom, there appears to be less use of languages other than the main ones of the region, i.e. Hausa, English and Arabic. This is likely to be because of the sheer number of first languages spoken, e.g. Hausa, Fulani, Kanuri, Babur, Igbira, Yoruba, Nupe, and Tuareg.

On the whole, classroom observations revealed no noticeable differences in teacher and student practices between the officially EME and HME schools. In both schools, teachers typically engaged in a whole-class, teacher-centred style of teaching, occasionally writing on the board. For example, Teacher 2, who taught English in the HME school, used the board to write main vocabulary, while the Basic Science teacher in the EME school wrote notes on the board about soil erosion. He asked the students to copy the notes and then explained, allowing them to ask questions that they then answered carefully together. From time to time, students are expected to read out answers in chorus. There was generally not a lot of peer group interaction or student-centred learning taking place in either school, although some did happen: in some of the English lessons in the HME school, two girls were assigned the task of constructing a sentence in English while some boys were grouped together to rewrite a sentence from active to passive voice. Notwithstanding the lack of opportunity for students to engage in active learning, there were many examples of good teacher practice in all three schools. For instance, teachers often started a lesson by relating the topic to that of

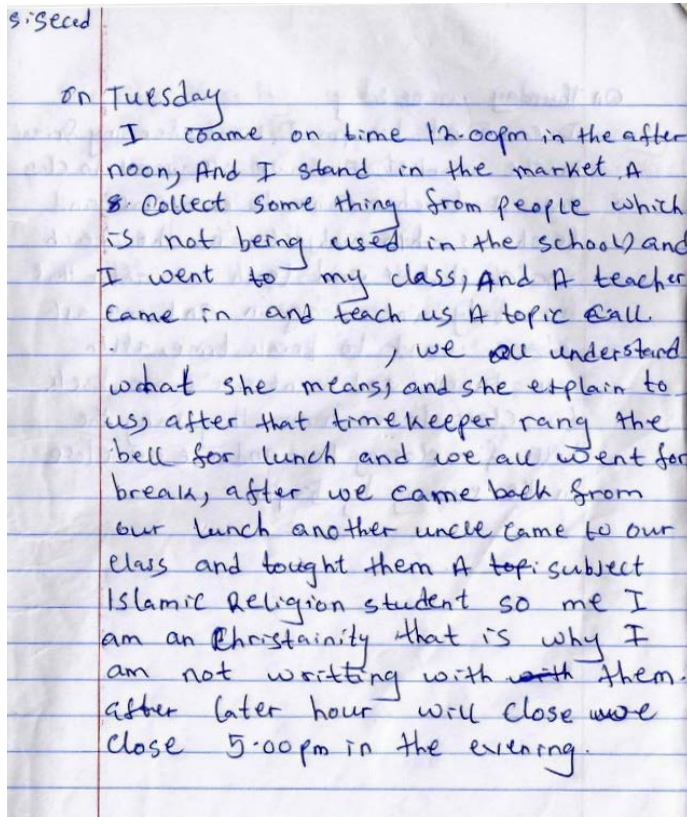
the previous lesson and then built on it from there, scaffolding the learning in effective ways. Additionally, during an English class in the HME school, where the topic was letter writing, the teacher introduced the lesson by asking the class if they write any letters and to whom. Similarly, in an EME Basic Science lesson, the teacher introduced the topic of soil by relating it to students' existing knowledge of soil and its different types and uses. In a girls' Maths lesson, the teacher began by engaging the students in correcting their homework assignment, which many of them had got wrong: the teacher called on students one by one to work out the mathematical equation under his guidance.

As is the case in Nepal, resources are scarce, and this applies to both schools regardless of medium of instruction. Class sizes are large, ranging from 42 to 73 in the HME school and 44 to 74 in the EME school. In many classrooms, there are not enough desks, and students have to squat on the floor or share those available, with sometimes up to four students sharing a desk designed for two. In some classes in the EME school, as many as half of the students have to sit on the floor. Resources such as computers, projectors and charts are not available, and although textbooks do exist, not all the students have them. In the EME school boys' section, the fieldworker notes: 'The class is not conducive to learning because of the large number of students (74); Crowded seating arrangements. Four students share some seats. However, they did not make noise'. During the Computer Science lesson, the teacher used illustrations from the textbook to explain parts of the computer to the students. However, because the classroom was so full, students at the back could not see the illustrations properly, and the teacher's voice being low, did not help matters. Similarly, during an English class, although the teacher gave some classroom exercises on the topic, there was no independent work because the seats were overcrowded. The class became noisy once the teacher turned to write on the board. For the third English lesson, there were no teaching

resources used by the teacher throughout the lesson, except the textbook, which not all students in the class had. The teacher had to write examples, exercises and assignments on the board for students to copy. The impact on learning of these over-crowded classrooms is likely significant.

## Engagement of girls in the classroom

As we have seen, girls are vastly underrepresented in EME. Of those who attend class, no clear pattern emerges as to whether one sex takes a more active part in the lesson. As a reminder, the EME school has two separate sections for each sex, whereas in the HME school, boys and girls are taught together although seated in separate rows. In some of these co-educated classes, the fieldworker observed that boys looked more confident and participated more actively, while in others, it was the girls. Most teachers also appeared to do a good job engaging both genders, alternating between the boys' and the girls' rows in assigning students to respond, so that as many students as possible had the opportunity to participate in the activities. In one of the English lessons in the mixed-sex HM school, there were more girls than boys in the class and while both sexes participated actively in the activities, the teacher called on a boy to answer a question after two girls had had their turn to ensure that every student had an opportunity to take part in the classroom activities. Conversely, when some girls, who looked quiet, resisted answering, the teacher encouraged them. During Hausa lessons in the HME school, the fieldworker observed: 'the girls seem to be more active than the boys to the extent that the teacher has to stop the girls from answering questions and concentrate on the boys'. On the other hand, during the Arabic lesson in the HME school, the teacher sometimes insisted on the girls answering questions as the boys were generally more willing to participate. In this class too, the



**Figure 11** Extract from Caroline's diary (English-medium school) detailing her school day and how different religious groups are accommodated

teacher asked two girls, who were seated at the back and were short, to move to a front seat. An English teacher appeared to have a pattern whereby for every boy that had answered a question, he asked a girl to express her opinion. The girls in this class were generally more active responding to questions, but it varied across different subjects.

As for the inclusion of minorities in the class, it is unusual for any particular ethnic, religious or tribal minority to be directly addressed as the teacher tends to address the whole class. Unlike the school in Nepal, which is Hindu majority, the schools in Nigeria are Muslim majority. For this reason, when the boys in the EME school are being taught Islamic Studies, the Christians in the class are free to either sit in the class and listen to the lesson or leave the class and go to the library. It is obvious, and perhaps unsurprising, that in both countries the default approach is the majority students' culture, faith and ethnicity. Other than that, the fieldworker made just a few references to any

particular group being treated differently, and observed that all groups (i.e. Hausa, Igala, Igbo, Yoruba, Fulani, Igbira, Nupe, Muslim, Christian) looked confident. In one of the English lessons, the teacher cited names of people to indicate their ethnicity as examples of proper nouns, but other than that, minority groups were not normally topicalised. The fieldworker noted that, 'a girl from a minority ethnic group looks so confident and each time the teacher asks a question, she raises up her hand to answer'. In the girls' EME Maths class, a class with 58 students, the fieldworker observed: 'the students were actively engaged in the lesson, the teacher called on students who he selected at random, regardless of religion or ethnicity and asked them to solve some mathematical problems on the board. Whenever a student got stuck, another one was called to assist her under the guidance of the teacher'. The fieldworker commented that some students do look less active or confident but they belong to all tribes.

# Discussion

With many LMICs having committed to the UN SDGs to improve gender equality and quality of education, this research addressed the question of how the rapid rise in EME in those countries affects girls, many of whom are already vulnerable to educational exclusion. Based on fieldwork in three English- and local-medium government secondary schools in Nepal and Nigeria, it explored attitudes and practices in relation to EME and gender, seeking to bring to the fore the voices of those directly involved in and affected by it: students,

parents, teachers, principals and policymakers. The research addressed three questions:

1. How does EME mediate educational access and participation for girls in LMICs?
2. To what extent does EME impact on learning for girls in LMICs?
3. To what extent does EME disadvantage girls, and are any girls at particular risk?

The answer to each of these questions is discussed below in turn.

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## 1. How does EME mediate educational access and participation for girls in LMICs?

### **EME mediates and perpetuates class- and gender-based educational inequalities**

A main finding of this research is the proportionately higher rate of boys in English-medium than local-medium education, in both Nepal and Nigeria. In Nepal, 69 per cent of students in the EME stream are boys and only 31 per cent girls. In Nigeria, the pattern is the same: 67 per cent of boys compared with 33 per cent of girls. In both contexts, the split in the national-medium schools is more equal. This gender disparity exists irrespective of students in both countries being adamant that girls should have equal access to EME, although some parents in both Nepal and Nigeria suggest that girls don't need it. In Nepal, the higher fees in the EME stream can deter some parents, particularly those from lower socio-economic classes, from sending their daughters to the EME stream as they cannot afford it. EME is widely believed to be the

privilege of wealthier families, and so EME has come to be associated with superior-quality education, with a distinct feeling among students in the NME stream that they're having to settle for 'second best'. Thus, where EME is associated with fees, even when fees are comparatively lower than those often paid for private education, this can act as a deterrent.

Financial constraint, however, is not the only factor accounting for girls' underrepresentation in EME; sociocultural norms about gender roles also play a part. While in both Nigeria and Nepal there is a clear recognition that English is essential to improve one's life opportunities, professional and personal aspirations are not gender-neutral, but deeply entrenched in beliefs about the roles girls and boys are expected to assume in society when they leave school. In Nepal, some participants explicitly state that girls do not need English as they are less likely to go abroad and more likely to become employed in government jobs, which

require Nepali. Early marriage and the dowry system, which comes out strongly in the Nepali interviews as being extremely damaging to girls' education, can disincentivise some parents, particularly those from lower socio-economic classes, from sending their daughters to the more prestigious EME stream, since a higher dowry will be expected for better-educated brides. Interview participants tell of girls as young as twelve who have been forced into marriage and made to drop out of school to look after their home and family. Nepali girls appear to have internalised the view that they don't need English, as questionnaire results show that they have a preference for NME, while Nepali boys have a preference for EME.

In Nigeria, economic reasons cannot explain the lower enrolment of girls in EME compared with HME since, apart from a small levy paid to the Parent Teachers Association, both schools are free of charge. (There may, however, be other hidden costs, e.g. transportation, uniform, books, etc. influencing educational choices.) The problem of early marriage is prevalent in Nigeria too, and this can contribute to the

underrepresentation of girls in EME since Hausa can be seen as particularly important for being a housewife. In contrast, several girls who aspire to become doctors emphasise the need for EME. Teachers, principals and policymakers all talk of girls as young as 13 who, bright and intelligent, are being pulled out of school to be married off.

As is the case in Nepal, EME cannot be considered separately from class-based inequalities and privatisation of education. Many students in Nigeria, including those enrolled in the EME government school, express regret at not being able to attend a private EME school, where the quality of education is perceived to be higher. Some participants explicitly voice that there is no point spending money on girls' education as they will marry and drop out anyway. Thus, in both Nepal and Nigeria, EME mediates and perpetuates class- and gender-based educational inequalities, between the private and the public sector and within the public sector itself. This brings us to the next question of the extent to which medium of education affects learning for girls in LMICs.

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## 2. To what extent does English-medium education impact on learning for girls in LMICs?

### **English-medium education must be considered alongside multiple other factors that impact on learning**

There is by now a sizeable literature suggesting that children acquire literacy best in their mother tongue; however, the case for MTB-MLE is less well-evidenced at post-primary stages of education, where literacy development is for most children further advanced. This research suggests that it is problematic to associate learning and attainment solely or mainly with the use of particular languages, at least at post-primary level, as multiple factors other than language coalesce to affect learning.

In Nepal, the fact that students in the EME stream come from better-resourced and more

academically oriented homes, are pre-selected for their academic abilities (because of entrance exams in the EME stream) and have teachers who are less frequently absent creates an environment in the EME stream that is more conducive to learning. This benefits comparatively stronger students while widening the gap to those in the NME stream, the vast majority of whom are girls from poorer families. There are frequent complaints in the NME stream about lack of discipline, noisy, dirty and crowded classrooms, lack of resources and absent teachers. Furthermore, as students in the NME stream were statistically more likely to report having to work outside of school (whether in paid jobs or unpaid household

work) compared with their peers in the EME stream, they have less time to study, thus further perpetuating their disadvantage. In Nigeria too, many students have to work, whether inside or outside of the home, in addition to going to school, and this particularly applies to the poorer students, limiting the time they have available to study. Diary accounts are particularly revealing here as almost all six girls, and some boys, expose the extraordinary amount of household work they are required to do, which leaves them little time to study.

Many participants in both Nigeria and Nepal report struggling to understand when the teacher speaks English, confirming existing evidence and intuitive knowledge that assimilating content may be more challenging in a language with which one is less familiar. On the other hand, however, many students in both Nigeria and Nepal don't necessarily know the local language (Nepali and Hausa, respectively) particularly well either as they may speak one or more other languages at home. Indeed, many participants report problems with understanding in the local language too, with 87 per cent of students in Nigeria across both EME and HME schools reporting comprehension difficulties due to the language of instruction. This points to the challenges of

implementing MTB-MLE in highly multilingual LMICs as it is never easy to do justice to all students given the sheer number of languages brought to the classroom. Moreover, the existence of teachers and materials in local languages may not be available, and some languages may not even have a writing system.

Students overwhelmingly prefer to be taught in English, with the only exception being Nepali students enrolled in NME. The preference for EME is echoed by parents too. EME is seen at one and the same time as the more challenging but also the more rewarding option, giving access to a wider range of opportunities. There is evidence that EME can lead to improved confidence in speaking English and higher self-reported proficiency. In both Nepal and Nigeria, students in EME were statistically more likely to self-report higher English language proficiency than those in national-medium education. Furthermore, questionnaire data from Nigeria and interviews in both Nepal and Nigeria revealed that it was particularly girls who were shy and embarrassed about speaking in English, inviting interpretations that girls' more restricted access to EME in both countries may lead to lower English proficiency<sup>15</sup>, and further down the line, potentially restrict their opportunities.

### 3. To what extent does EME disadvantage girls, and are any girls at particular risk?

#### **EME is likely to perpetuate challenges for the most disadvantaged girls while affording opportunities for others.**

When assessing the extent to which English as a medium of education disadvantages girls, it is important to take into account not only medium of education but the multitude of factors that combine to create and perpetuate learning inequalities. This research shows that one such important factor is class. Thus, EME should not be considered on its own but as mediating and perpetuating class- and gender-based

educational inequalities. In Nepal, girls from poorer families are heavily underrepresented in EME, partly because parents are less willing to invest in their daughters' education and partly because girls are not seen as needing English to the same extent. Girls from poorer families thus face a double disadvantage, both by learning less (English) when in school and by having their future professional and educational opportunities restricted by knowing English less well.

15. In Nepal, this is confirmed by external assessment too (Acharya et al., 2020).

The research reveals a clear lack of resources and investment in government schools in both countries. In Nigeria, complaints about teacher absenteeism are rife in both government schools, irrespective of the medium of education. The diary accounts, kept over two random weeks, were particularly revealing in this regard, with one girl recounting that when a teacher did not show up after the lunch break, the class was dismissed after half a day. A few days later, her diary tells of having had to trek a considerable distance to school, having failed to hail a tricycle, only to find that no teacher had turned up, causing her to trudge back home again, having wasted most of the day. Classrooms are crowded, with up to 74 students in some classes, and there are insufficient benches, resulting in some students having to sit on the floor. Water supplies and drainage systems are not functioning properly. All of this leads to noisy classrooms and poor discipline, creating environments that are not conducive to learning. In Nepal, complaints about teacher absenteeism, and noisy and dirty classrooms are widespread in the NME stream but not in the quasi-privatised EME stream, where parent 'donations' fund the hiring of part-time teachers from the private sector who are more reliable in their attendance and more able to maintain classroom discipline. Thus, although the emergence of private schools may offer benefits and a wider range of choice to those families who can afford it, it may also widen the gap to those who cannot.

Speaking to the core of the SDGs 'to leave no one behind', this research was designed to include the voices of those who are potentially doubly disadvantaged by their gender and other demographic factors, be it socio-

economic class, ethnicity, religion, or tribe in Nigeria and caste in Nepal. Although it is difficult to get solid findings on the disadvantages faced by girls from minoritised communities, precisely because these girls do not feature in any great numbers in the data, the research does point to challenges being compounded for minoritised girls. Impressions from classroom observations in the Hindu-majority school in Nepal suggest that Hindu girls may be given more opportunities to answer questions in class, and that the content taught mainly reflects their culture. Similarly, when students in the Muslim-majority region of Kano, Nigeria, are taught Islamic studies, students of Christian faith either leave the class and sit in the library or stay, as they wish. Open-ended responses from the questionnaires and interview data from Nepal tentatively suggest that, as expected, the most marginalised group is Muslim girls, as they face both faith- and gender-based challenges. Commendably, the school already has government-directed measures in place to help this group of girls, with fees being waived for Muslim girls to enter EME. The Madhesi community, which constitutes the majority in this school, also faces issues as they can have difficulties understanding Nepali, which is not their home language. In Nigeria, stigmatisation appeared to mostly affect students in the Hausa-medium stream, where members of other tribes and ethnicities report being made fun of as they are not able to speak Hausa as well as other students. This may be one reason why students in the Hausa-medium school express a preference for EME, as it does not privilege a certain tribal or ethnic background.

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## Limitations and further research

This research has only been able to scratch the surface of how EME affects girls' educational opportunities in LMICs, and it is hoped that it

will inspire further research into the area. Three limitations and suggestions for further research are outlined below: 1. a need for hard data; 2. a need for class-based approaches; 3. a focus on minoritised groups.

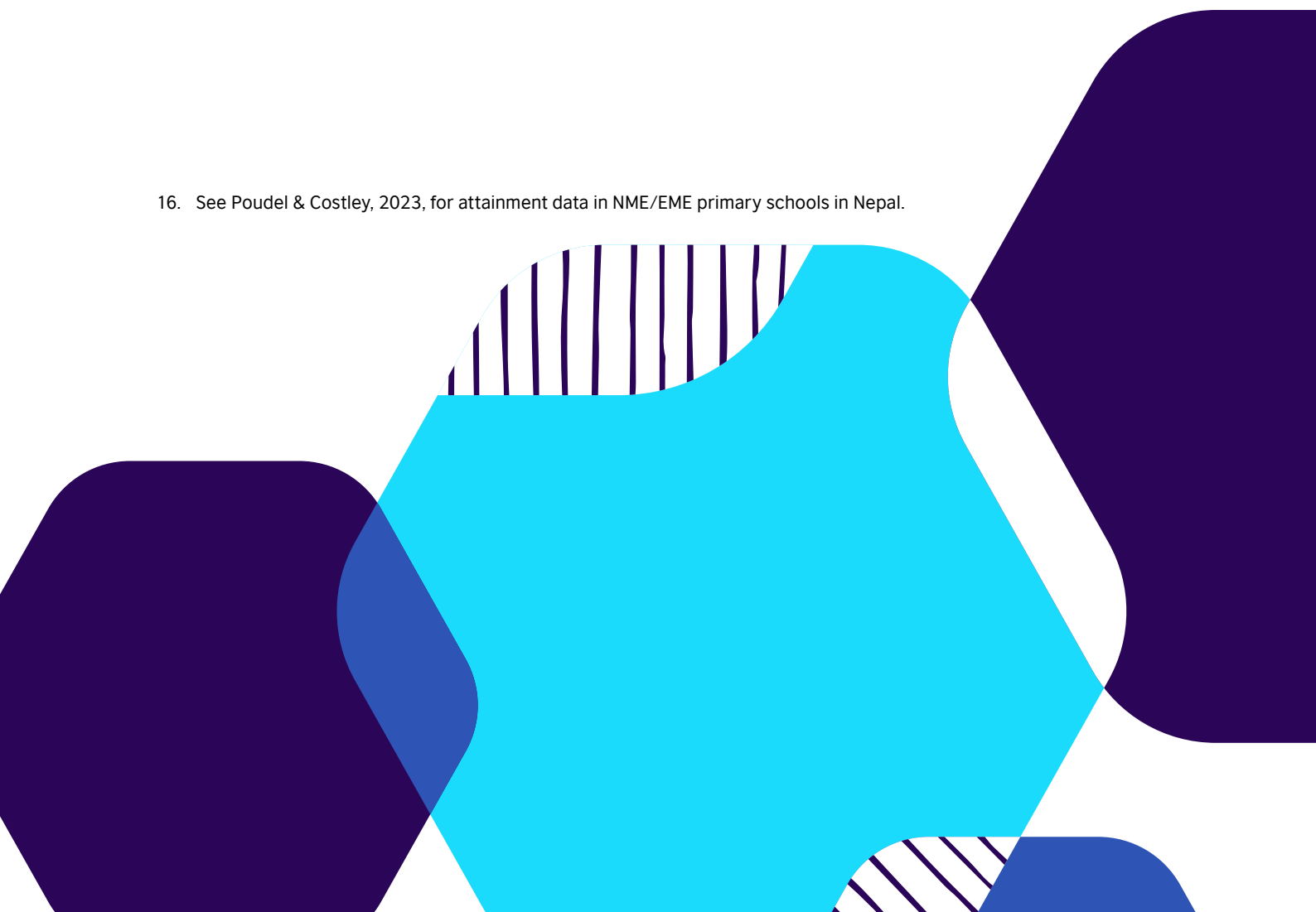
1. The study was limited to three schools in two LMICs as it aimed to provide in-depth



and contrastive accounts of both EME and national-medium students and bring to the fore the voices of those directly involved in and affected by it. Further research could usefully collect hard data on enrolment, attainment, completion and employability from a greater number of schools to confirm or disconfirm if the class- and gender-based patterns correlating with language stream that have been revealed in this study are replicated elsewhere too.<sup>16</sup>

2. The research has identified a need to understand how class, gender and medium of education interact. As we saw in Nepal, EME was funded through a quasi-privatisation of a government school, and so further research could usefully be conducted into how private and public education interact with gender and medium of education.
3. Despite an intention to elicit the voices of minorities, the research was only able to gain glimpses into the multiple forms of oppression that affect girls' educational opportunities. Such groups are always difficult to reach precisely because they are vulnerable to exclusion. Future research could beneficially employ a range of approaches, including ones that are sensitive to local specificities and can capture the voices of minorities.

16. See Poudel & Costley, 2023, for attainment data in NME/EME primary schools in Nepal.



# Conclusion

This research has sought to build on and take forward the scarce research that exists on EME and gender in low- and middle-income countries. The report drew some tentative conclusions, suggesting that EME mediates and perpetuates class- and gender-based educational inequalities by restricting access to EME for girls, particularly those from poorer families. It was further argued that EME creates a Matthew effect that offers in- and post-school opportunities for those who are already advantaged while restricting opportunities for the most disadvantaged girls. We have emphasised that to truly understand which girls are disadvantaged by EME necessitates an approach that is sensitive to the political economy and increasing gaps between rich

and poor, and majority and minority groups. As governments in LMICs seek ways in which to honour their commitment to the SDGs to get girls into education, it is hoped that this research will raise awareness of how EME may threaten attainment of those goals unless further research is conducted and policy interventions made.



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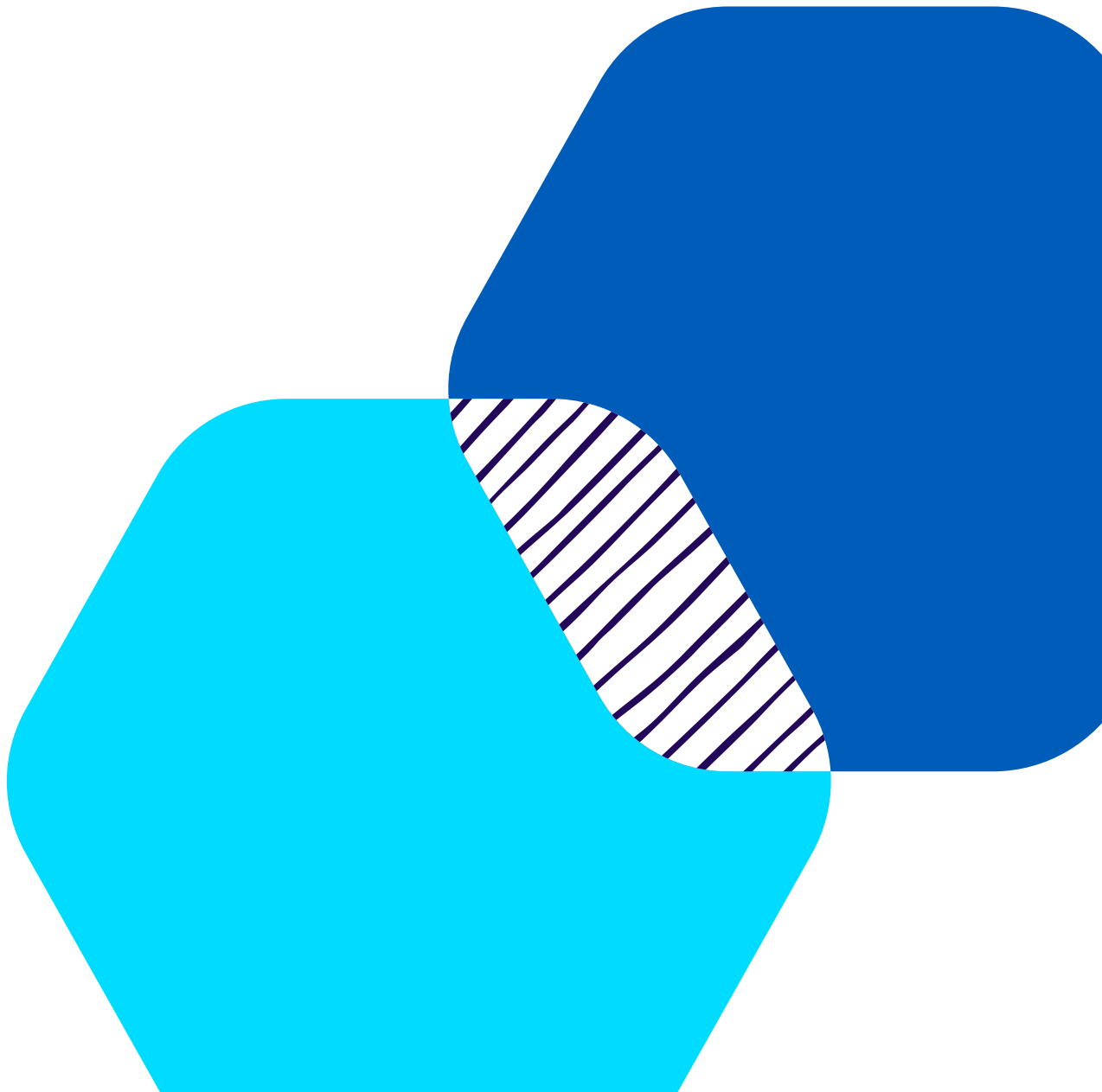


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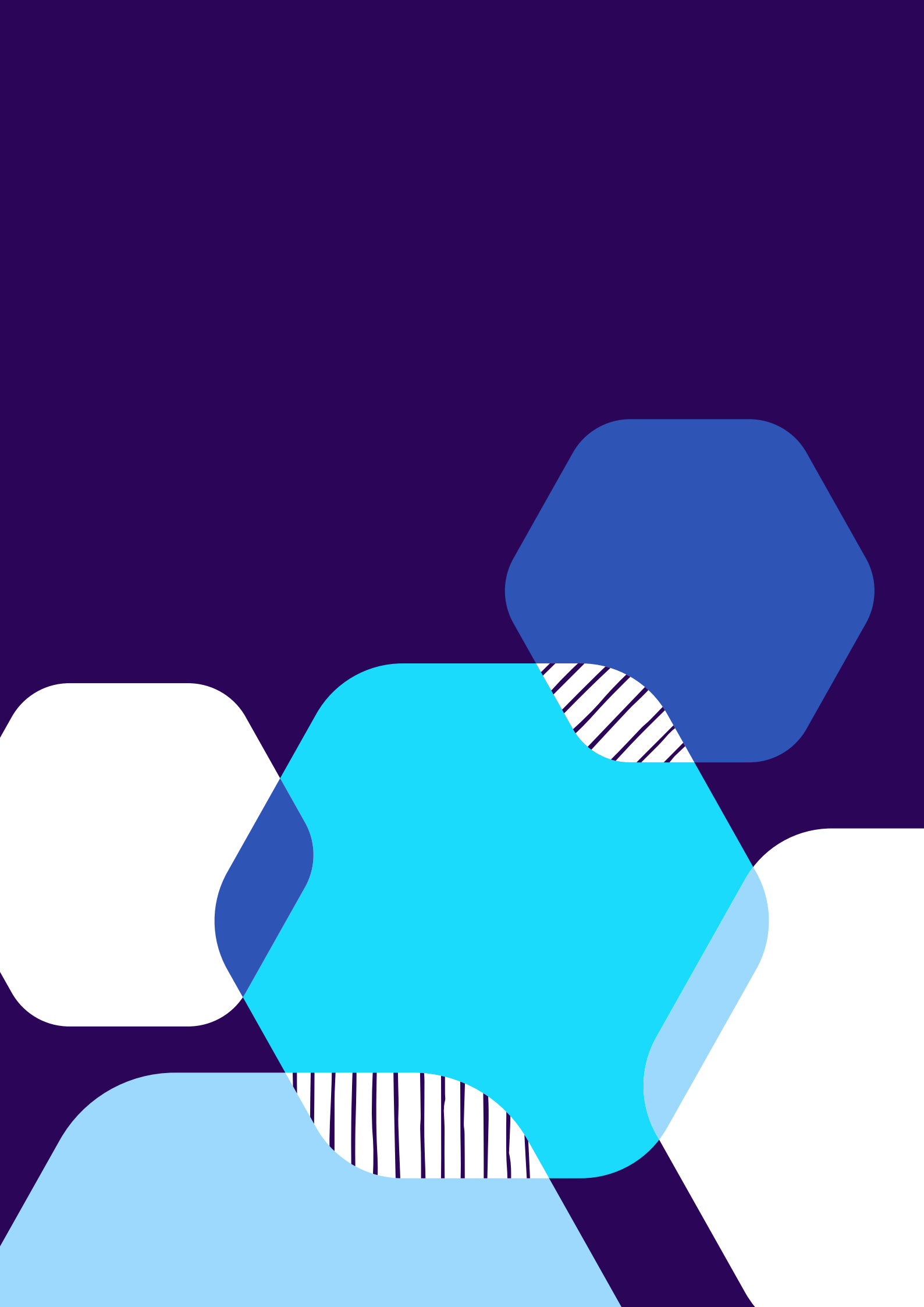
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