

**The Relationship Between Participation in Community Groups and Attitudes About  
Marriage and Gender Roles\***

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper examines the relationship between non-family experiences and attitudes related to marriage and gender roles. The analysis uses the theoretical framework of ideational influences, particularly development idealism and the family mode of social organization. The study uses life histories and individual survey data from Nepal to explore the association between participation in community groups and attitudes toward early marriages for girls, widow remarriage, daughter-in-law obedience to mothers-in-law, and husbands making most of the decisions in the household. The results reveal a strong relationship between group participation experiences and attitudes, while controlling for individual characteristics, new experiences of the respondents and their childhood community context. In general, non-family experiences with community groups have the potential to reach essential services to the community and to influence attitudes and behaviors of men and women. Though the current research utilizes cross-sectional data, future panel studies have the potential to contribute towards important causal analysis.

## **Introduction**

Studies in social demography and social psychology have demonstrated that attitudes are a key determinant of social change in family and demographic behavior. In particular, attitudes towards gender roles have been shown to have influenced family life, marriage, and employment (Thornton et al 1983; Barber and Axinn, 1998; Cunningham, et al 2005). Research in rapidly changing, non Western settings has demonstrated that the availability of new non family opportunities have been important mechanisms for social change that affect individuals and subsequently their families. Experiences of going to school, working for pay, exposure to youth clubs, and exposure to health services have been shown to have had important effects on changing attitudes and behaviors regarding transitions in fertility and in marital behavior (Axinn et al. 2001; Barber, 2004; Yabiku, 2005; Ghimire et al 2006).

New experiences for individuals are likely to introduce them to different ideas, norms, values and beliefs. Ideational changes or changes due to the spread of new ideas also have been shown to have important consequences in shaping individuals' attitudes and behaviors that have become important forces in changing many family and demographic behaviors (Caldwell et al, 1983; Lesthaeghe and Surkyn, 1988; Thornton, 2005; Yount, 2005). The introduction of new ideas thus can be an indirect process, such as through an educational curriculum that has been left as a legacy of the colonial times, or more directly through the introduction of the concepts and ideas of gender equality and egalitarianism through other formal trainings.

For over three decades, a principle implementation strategy for poverty reduction and social justice in poor countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America have focused on the “community group” approach of organizing individuals into different kinds of community groups. This approach has been more targeted and cost effective for reaching individuals and communities with basic services like health and education, technical inputs in agriculture, access to economic opportunities and markets through savings and credit programs, and access to and control over the management of local natural resources. Most often such an approach targets poor men, women, children and members of marginalized communities with goals of social equity and justice.

The present study examines the relationship between such non-family, new experiences for men and women, and its association with their gender attitudes, within a context that is

rapidly undergoing social change. Four specific attitudes are selected to broadly represent “gender attitudes”. They are specific attitudes about the timing of marriage for girls, remarriage of young widows, the role expectations of daughters-in-law, and the role of men in household decision-making. The data used for this study is from a setting in Nepal, where such attitudes and behaviors are closely linked to the role of the family and of socio-cultural norms that continue to control marital behavior, place strict restrictions over the sexuality of women, and enforce specific norms related to gender roles with the households.

The data comes from an individual survey and life histories conducted in 1996, in Chitwan valley in south central Nepal. It includes multiple measures of non-family experiences of several cohorts of individuals, including participation in different kinds of community groups, and attitudes related to marriage, family, child bearing and other demographic attributes.

### **The Setting**

The setting for this study is the Western Chitwan Valley in south-central Nepal, a setting which has undergone tremendous social and economic changes within a short time span. In the mid 1950s the government cleared virgin forest areas, focused on eradication of malaria and permitted re-settlement of migrants who were attracted by the fertile soils. The Valley was subsequently linked by roads in the early 1970s, and by 1979 Chitwan’s largest town, Narayanghat was linked to the capital city Kathmandu and cities in eastern Nepal and India, transforming the city into one of the key transportation hubs of the country by the mid-1980s. This change subsequently spear headed the rapid proliferation of schools and services such as health, markets, communication and banking, and opened up access to such non-family experiences and organizations (Axinn and Yabiku, 2001). It also increased opportunities for government services to be expanded into the areas and non government agencies to implement a multitude of poverty alleviation programs. Most often these programs organized men and women into “community groups” which were used as an entry point for training, technology transfer and resource allocation.

### *Gender Relations in Nepal*

The multiethnic and multicultural element of society in Nepal entails that there are variations in social beliefs and practices and gender relations within the ethnic sub/groups (Bista, 1972; Acharya and Bennett, 1981; Gurung, 1998). Gender roles and attitudes are broadly

polarized and this deeply permeates most aspect of social life. A predominately Hindu society, the social structure is marked by patriarchy and strict gender hierarchies, where gender roles are characterized by greater access, control and decision-making over social, economic and political resources by men, within the family and at community and national levels. Such basic gender inequalities have severely affected the life outcomes, the conditions and positions of women not only in Chitwan and Nepal but also throughout the South Asia region (Caldwell, et al. 1983; Dyson and Moore, 1983; Morgan and Niraula, 1995).

For the purpose of this study a broad conceptualization of gender roles and attitudes is used. Marriage in Chitwan is nearly universal and generally controlled by the family. The mean age at marriage for women who have married is 16.5 years. Recent empirical evidence has shown that marriage age and marital arrangements are slowly changing due to the influence of new ideas learned through participation in non family activities (Ghimire et al. 2006; de Jong et al. 2006). Child marriage, i.e. the marriage of girls before their menstruation, is a practice based on the Hindu belief of the “gift of the virgin” by fathers during marriage and the fierce protection of the sexuality and fertility of women. The control of a woman’s sexuality and fertility by the patriarchal family extends to after a woman is widowed (Bennett, 1983). Widow remarriage is forbidden by Hindu practices and the stigma and discrimination against widows contributes tremendously to extremely poor life outcomes for them. Hindu men, on the other hand, have never faced restrictions in terms of early age at marriage or multiple marriages or marriage after the death of one’s spouse. Practices of child marriage and the stigma and discrimination against widows thereby represent the broader context of unequal gender relations in the society. This context is particularly true for the High caste Hindus though, with the Hinduization<sup>1</sup> of the non Hindu caste/ethnic groups in Nepal, the practice has spread to other groups to some extent.

The patriarchal kinship system also prescribes patrilocal residence for women after marriage as well as residence within an extended family system comprising in-laws and married and unmarried siblings of the husband. The situation in Chitwan is similar for the Hinduized caste groups, hence role expectations from daughters-in-law and male dominance in decision

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<sup>1</sup> “Hinduization” is the more contemporary term used to emphasize the adoption of Hindu norms, values, practices and forms by non-Hindu. The concept is a derivation from M. N. Srinivas’s introductory concept of “Sanskritization” in his landmark study, *Social Change in Modern India* (1966) that denotes the process of social mobilization by low caste groups by adopting the norms and practices of high caste Hindus.

making in most aspects of the family and the household follow historically held attitudes and practices.

### *Community Group Activities in Nepal and Chitwan*

In Nepal, community groups have been established across the nation with social, economic and resource management objectives primarily at the local levels (Biggs, et al. 2004). Membership in multiple community groups is a relatively new experience for men and women in the context of Nepal, in what has become a fast growing phenomenon and strategy to expand social and economic services and benefits. In their 2004 study, Biggs, Gurung and Messerschmidt, take an in-depth look at gender, social inclusion and empowerment through “development” groups and group based organizations in Nepal. They estimate the existence of close to 400,000 micro-level, sectoral and other types of groups. Such micro level groups are the most common type of community groups sponsored or supported by government and non government agencies to implement their programs. The formation of such groups becomes a key point in the “social mobilization” effort, which Biggs et al. describe as *“an attempt to harness and enhance human capacity; i.e. the willingness and the potential of local people to help themselves”* (2004).

Often a key goal in social mobilization efforts has been to mobilize women and other poor, marginalized individuals to realize their rights, and to give them “voice”<sup>2</sup>. Groups thus formed are given specific technical inputs in the form of skill development training, support for livestock or agriculture equipment, and orientations in accessing local level government services and other resources. The shift in the paradigm from a ‘needs based approach’ to a ‘rights based approach’ focused attention on basic human rights of women and other socially excluded groups of people. Hence, since the late 1980s, for many groups, variations of training on concepts of gender equality, gender sensitive analysis, planning, implementation, and monitoring of community level programs have been part of the group orientation process. The political conflict since the mid 1990s have turned those efforts towards community based peace building, rehabilitation and reconstruction of communities affected by the conflict.

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<sup>2</sup> Refer to Weinberger and Jütting (2001) for a discussion on how the participation of the poorest groups have often been questioned due to the high opportunity costs involved and the limited existence of social network ties among such individuals. Also refer to Leve (2001) for an important critique on the reality and motives behind the “participation” and “empowerment” agenda of NGOs and aid agencies.

In Nepal, civic organizations for mutual support have long existed and were organized, recognized and valued by communities and ethnic groups (Biggs et al 2004). Most of the customary groups were based on kinship or ethnicity (e.g. the *guthis* of the Newars) while others were based on neighborhood ties that often centered on shared or common resources (e.g. the agriculture labor exchange custom of *parma*, indigenous groups managing local forests, pastureland and irrigation systems). The community groups studied here are more of a mid-20<sup>th</sup> century phenomenon. Types of groups vary based on specific objectives, and so do the number of members in each group. Often sex and ethnicity specific groups are also formed. In mixed groups, government policy stipulates that at least 33 percent of group membership comprise women while non-government agencies aim for higher participation. Most groups elect or nominate an executive body to lead and steer the group but participatory planning, implementation and decision-making is established as the norm for almost all group activities. The presence of such new institutions and organizations, with their specific emphasis on the individual level membership for men and women, the introduction of new norms and activities that are not part of the customary family expectations and roles have the potential of influencing attitudes and behaviors of the participating men and women.

This study looks at participation in six particular types of groups that have specific objectives. Most of these community groups are widespread hence it is extremely likely for individuals to be members of more than one group in order to access a range of services and benefits. The study focuses on experiences of membership in Women's Groups, Youth Groups, Credit Groups, Small Farmers Development Groups, Agriculture Groups and a range of "Other" project specific groups such as literacy groups, health groups, ethnicity specific groups, advocacy groups, multipurpose community planning and development groups.

### **The Influence of the Family Mode of Social Organization and Ideational Change**

This study is guided by two compelling theoretical frameworks: the family mode of social organization (Thornton and Fricke, 1987; Thornton and Lin, 1994) and development idealism (Thornton, 2001; 2005). The family mode of social organization focuses on social changes brought about by the introduction of new social and economic institutions and organizations that affect the production, consumption, socialization, authority patterns, information flow which were originally being organized and controlled by families.

With the introduction of a number of social and economic institutions within a short span of time, individuals and families have experienced expanded opportunities for interaction beyond the family. Evidence from Chitwan has shown how the introduction of non-family social and economic institutions have influenced young people's marital timing, their participation in spouse choice, tolerance for intercaste marriage and divorce, and their fertility (Axinn and Yabiku, 2001; Yabiku, 2005; Ghimire et al., 2006; de Jong et al. 2006). Given the reciprocal relationship between attitudes and behaviors, on the one hand, such new behaviors are likely to have an influence on the attitudes of individuals and on the other hand, their attitudes are also likely to influence new or different behaviors (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980; Ajzen, 1991).

Participating in community group activities in Chitwan presents opportunities for men and women to become involved in new roles and introduces them to norms and expectations that are different from the long established ones. For example, in the case of a group with members comprising both men and women, a new platform is established where men and women are expected to participate on an equal footing. These groups often elect an executive committee which helps run the group and most often women who get elected or selected on the committee have never had prior experiences of fulfilling such roles. In many cases, men also experience for the first time, women in leadership roles. Thornton and Fricke use an "actor-based" perspective where the behaviors of individuals and families change in response to the changes in the social and economic context and constraints (1987:749). Thus the "actor" is introduced to a setting that is far more independent from that controlled by the family, and is likely to give rise to attitudes about gender roles that are different than the prevailing ones.

Thornton's (2001 and 2005) ideational framework helps further to explain how participation in community groups in Chitwan can potentially lead to more egalitarian gender attitudes. Thornton argues that early scholars of family changes inferred that "less developed" nations and "more traditional" families eventually follow a trajectory that would help them become like their "more developed" contemporaries. Such thinking gave rise to a set of ideals that "modern society" is good and attainable, along with notions of how the "modern family" is a cause and an effect of modern society, and "human beings have the right to be free and equal, with relationships based on consent" (Thornton, 2001 and 2005). Such Western ideas of individualism and egalitarianism have been transmitted through systems of education, media,



and other non-family activities that subsequently divides individuals between those adopting newer, more “western” attitudes and those holding on to more customary ones.

Due to the political and social isolation of Nepal till the early 1950s, age old Hindu customs of child marriage, prohibition of widow remarriage and ostracisation of widows, and the highly gendered roles of men and women in all aspects of family and community life, underwent very little changes. Since the opening up of the country, Western and non Hindu ideas have been introduced through schools, the media, increased mobility of individuals, and through donor assisted poverty alleviation programs, providing opportunities for individuals to be exposed to alternate ideas, attitudes and behaviors. It is this notion of what is *modern, good and attainable*, propagated through the development idealism, that is likely to bring a shift in attitudes and behaviors among individuals of different generations. The fact that such rapid changes have occurred within a short span of time entails that individuals of different generations in places like Chitwan have had the experiences of such changes within their own lifetime.

Given this particular theoretical context, the study focuses on participation in community group activities as a relatively “new” experience for individuals. They present opportunities for exposure to new ideas, new activities and modes of social organization that are different from the historical context and far from the control of the family. This in turn is very likely to have an influence on long held gender attitudes and behaviors. Therefore this study proposes to test the hypothesis that *individuals who participate in community groups have more egalitarian gender attitudes compared to those who have not participated in community groups*. The analysis will control for the effects of both the individual characteristics of the respondents as well as their new, non-family experiences of education, media exposure, travel and employment beyond the household to control for the potential spurious consequences.

There are multiple mechanisms of attitude formation that are related to gender roles and these are influenced by the environment of the home and community, and values of society, religion, family (Thornton, Alwin and Camburn, 1983; Barber and Axinn, 2004). Three specific mechanisms are proposed here which operate together to help understand the potential influence of community group participation on egalitarian gender attitudes.

*Exposure to new ideas and opportunities for men and women by engaging in non-family activities.*

Unlike in customary, culturally embedded groups, being engaged in community groups gives men and women the opportunity for exposure to new ideas and roles. Men and women participate in different kinds of groups, some of which are sex segregated. In the case of mixed groups where members comprise both men and women, they receive a platform to engage in non-family activities together. As group members they receive technical and skill development training based on the key objectives of the group. They also receive orientations and training on gender equality and are introduced to gender sensitive analysis, planning and monitoring of community level activities. They learn processes of decision-making which are “participatory” in nature, i.e. all members are expected to be part of the decision-making process following democratic norms<sup>3</sup>. Women often receive opportunities to occupy key leadership positions, thereby getting new opportunities to exercise power outside the household, and cultivate new relations in the community – all roles that have customarily been attributed only to the men. Hence for both men and women, a perception of the potential for a more wide range of roles for women becomes evident through participation in these group processes even though not every member may exercise positions of authority.

Often for men, it is the first time they experience such new roles for women. In the case of groups that engage in micro credit activities or conduct revolving savings and credit activities, the participation of women most often brings direct economic benefits to the family as well as enhanced social recognition within the community. Such experiences can help stimulate more egalitarian attitudes about the role of men and women in household decision-making, as well as in non-family areas. The idea of linking egalitarian behavior as essentially ‘good’ and ‘modern’ is also a reflection of the strong role of the development idealism in operation.

*Increased acknowledgement, acceptance and respect for the new knowledge, skills and potentials of women as “individuals”.*

Men and women also cultivate a range of new skills and capacities depending on the type of community groups they are involved in. They cultivate literacy and accounting skills, technical knowledge in different areas, and marketing skills. They gain community leadership skills related to public speaking, community organization, planning and monitoring, and they

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<sup>3</sup> Refer to Leve (2001) for an important critique on the reality and motives behind the “participation” and “empowerment” agenda of NGOs and aid agencies.

learn how to deal with government and non government officials in different offices, health centers, banks, etc. These changes are often more radical for women than men, since gender roles are so often deeply divided. Similarly, women also have increased access to economic resources (savings and credit, natural resources, local government funds, etc.). These new skills and experiences potentially provide men with a new respect for women, not just as individuals to be controlled and dominated, but individuals with a broader range of skills and capabilities, originally exercised only by men. These experiences help both men and women to accept and acknowledge the potential role of women as individuals in their own right, capable of functioning and contributing to non-family activities. Hence the perception of women beyond their household reproductive roles makes it less necessary for their sexuality and destinies as virgin brides and widows to be protected and controlled.

*Enhanced sense of individualism and agency, particularly among women.*

Building on Thornton and Fricke's "actor-based" perspective where the behaviors of individuals and families change in response to the changes in the social and economic context and constraints (1987:749), experiencing new non-family activities entails women to behave differently, which is relatively more independent from the family. The inputs in terms of training, financial resources and access to information which they receive not only helps in building their capacity but this can also enhance their sense of individual capacity and subsequently their own agency of consciously taking steps and making decisions to improve their own conditions and positions. This experience is likely to create greater willingness among women to be more involved in decisions that affect their own lives and those of their daughters. Hence attitudes about child marriage, widow remarriage and having more say in household decision-making processes are likely to change from one of passivity to one of more conscious thoughts and active participation. The social and economic benefits, together with the acknowledgement of new knowledge, skills and capacities, potentially increases men's respect for women as individuals with new roles, capabilities and having the ability to make decisions for themselves.

## **Data and Methods**

The study uses data collected by the Chitwan Valley Family Study (CVFS) in 1996 in the Chitwan Valley in south-central Nepal. The CVFS selected a systematic probability sample of

171 neighborhoods in western Chitwan where neighborhoods were defined as a geographic cluster of 5-15 households (Barber et al., 1997). The structured individual survey component interviewed every resident between the ages of 15 and 59 with a 97% response rate. The CVFS classified the communities into five major ethnic groups – the High Caste Hindus (the largest group), Low Caste Hindus, Hill Tibeto-Burmese, Terai Tibeto-Burmese, and Newars. For the purpose of this analysis, only respondents between the ages 25-54 are used, since this group is most likely to have participated in a variety of community group activities. Respondents above 55 years in age and those categorized as “others” in their caste/ethnicity were not included due to the relatively small number of cases. Thus the analysis reported here is for 2,829 respondents with complete data. Missing data was less than 1% for all variables used except for the question measuring father’s schooling experiences which were about 1.95%.

#### *Attitudes Related to Marriage and Gender Roles*

The analysis focuses on four attitude variables broadly categorized as “gender attitudes” as they focus on gendered norms in relation to marriage and gender role expectations. Two measures are selected to represent attitudes towards marriage and two additional ones are selected to represent attitudes towards gender roles:

1. A girl should be married before her first menstruation.
2. A young widow should remarry another man.
3. A man should make most of the decisions in the household.
4. After coming to her husband’s home, a daughter-in-law should be obedient to her mother-in-law.

The responses to all the variables were recorded on a scale of 1 to 4 (strongly agree, agree, disagree and strongly disagree) with 1 representing strongly agree and 4 representing strongly disagree. The scale of 1 to 4 going from strong agreement to strong disagreement is taken to represent a scale of increasingly egalitarian attitudes<sup>4</sup>.

#### *Participation in Community Groups*

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<sup>4</sup> The responses to the variable “a young widow should remarry” were reverse coded in order to make all the responses consistent in the same direction.

In gathering information about the experiences of the respondents, they are asked whether they had “*ever been a member of any groups or associations such as a User’s Group, Mothers Group, a group organized by health volunteers, Rotary Club, or any other type of association or organization*”<sup>5</sup>. This is a dichotomous variable with 18% (n=512) of the respondents having ever participated in groups of which 64% were men. A follow-up question was also asked to identify the types of groups respondents had ever been members of, and the responses resulted in seven different types of groups. The breakdown of membership of men and women in different kinds of groups is presented in Table 1.

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Table 1 about here

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Several groups of control variables are included in the multivariate models in order to identify the independent effect of group participation on gender attitudes. The controls are classified into two broad categories: individual characteristics and new non-family experiences.

#### *Individual Characteristics of the Respondents*

**Gender:** Given that Nepal has long established, deeply divided gender norms and practices, the sex of the respondents (coded female=1, male=0), is an important factor in the study. Attitudes can differ among men and women and the factors affecting those differences merit in-depth analysis. Thus interaction effects between gender and education, and gender and participation in groups is also tested.

**Caste/ ethnicity:** Despite multiple ethnicities, languages and cultures present in the country and in the study area, for analysis purposes ethnicity has been categorized into five major groups: high-caste Hindus, low-caste Hindus, Newars, Hill Tibeto-Burmese, and Terai Tibeto-Burmese (Axinn and Yabiku, 2001). The high caste Hindus are the majority group and have relatively strict social norms related to the role of women, but they are also the most privileged social group in terms of education and other life outcomes. The Hill Tibeto Burmese

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<sup>5</sup> The question provides examples of a few types of groups. “Users Groups” are groups which are formed with members who “use” a particular service or common resource. Examples of such groups are Drinking Water User Groups, Irrigation User Groups, Community Forest User Groups, etc. Groups such as the Drinking Water User Groups are often formed at the outset of the construction of a piped water system in the community where households which will be served will participate in the resource mobilization, construction and supervision, and management and operation of the water system. A Community Forest User Group will constitute of representatives of all households that use the particular patch of forest and will participate in the conservation and management of the forest.

and the Terai Tibeto Burmese groups generally have lower education and poorer life outcomes, but the low caste Hindus who suffer from historical, economic and social discrimination have the poorest outcomes. Dummy variables are created for the five caste/ethnic groups and the high-caste Hindu group is treated as the reference group.

**Birth Cohorts:** Birth cohorts exert differing influences on social roles and expectations in Nepali society especially in the case of a strictly hierarchal society and in the context of where within a span of 50 years many social changes have been introduced in the study area. Dummy variables are created for birth cohorts (coded 1 and 0). The birth cohort of 1962-1971 (age group 25-34) is treated as the reference group.

**Parental Characteristics:** Previous research has indicated the impact of parental attitudes and behavior on children (Thornton, 1991; Axinn and Thornton, 1996; Barber, 2004). The educational experiences of parents and their experiences with paid work are a likely source of new ideas and experiences being introduced into the family thereby influencing the experiences, attitudes and subsequent behaviors of their children. Four measures of parental characteristics are used and the responses are recoded into two indexes. The first index measures whether either of the parent ever had any education (“mother ever educated” and/or “father ever educated”). The second index measures whether either of the parent ever worked for pay (“mother worked for pay” and/or “father worked for pay”).

**Childhood Neighborhood Community Context:** Recent empirical evidence shows the effect of community level changes on individual attitudes and behavior (Axinn and Barber, 2001). In order to segregate the effects of the childhood context of the respondents, six neighborhood characteristics that are likely to exert an influence during the childhood of the respondents were identified and formed into an index. The measures selected for the index were the presence of schools, buses, cinema, employment opportunities, development programs, and women’s groups in the neighborhood where the respondents grew up<sup>6</sup>.

### *New Experiences of the Respondents*

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<sup>6</sup> The survey questions for these measures asked whether there were any schools, buses, cinemas, any employers, development programs or women’s groups within a one hour walk before the respondents were age 12. For example the measure about development program was recorded by asking the following question: “*Were there any programs, such as small farmer’s program, forestation, road construction, electrification or any other development activities, implemented in (any of) the place(s) you lived up until you were 12 years old?*”

The second group of controls is related to newer non-family experiences which present opportunities for the respondents to be exposed to or experience non-family activities and thus an opportunity to be exposed to ideas, norms and behaviors that are different from ones that were long established and controlled by the family.

**Educational Attainment:** The respondents were asked the highest grade in school or year of college they had completed (from no education to 10 years and more). Almost 53% of respondents have had no education, while less than 16% of the respondents have had 10 years or more of education. Studies have shown how formal education has been linked to social change and a wide range of social transformations such as economic growth, demographic transitions, political growth, and status attainment (Caldwell, 1982, Malhotra and Mather, 1997; Axinn and Barber, 2001; Beutel and Axinn, 2002; Ahearn, 2004). Caldwell's 1982 work on fertility decline suggests how western education exposes women and men to ideologies emphasizing independence from the extended family and egalitarian conjugal relationships. This potentially holds true for Chitwan too as the education system and context in Nepal is heavily influenced by that of India, where western educational traditions and curricula were established by the British during the colonial period<sup>7</sup>.

**Exposure to media, travel and employment:** There are strong theoretical reasons for the role of media in influencing attitudes and behaviors. Barber and Axinn (2004) provide an empirical analysis of mass media as a mainly ideational mechanism for influencing fertility limiting behavior. In Nepal, radio and newspapers are the key means of mass communication. Though there is relatively limited access to television and cinema, they are heavily influenced by programs depicting western notions of love and freedom, and the private cable channels also broadcast American sitcoms, movies, soap operas, etc. An index of four variables is created to measure exposure to the media - ever listened to a radio, watched TV, watched a movie, and/or a movie on a VCR (0=no and 1=yes for all variables).

Traveling to new places, and working for pay outside of the home are additional experiences that potentially exposes people to new norms, cultures and behavior. Two measures of travel experiences of the respondents - "*travel to Kathmandu ever*" and "*travel outside of*

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<sup>7</sup> While the effects of educational attainment on egalitarian gender attitudes does not need to be highly speculated, a potentially interesting and new question for future research is related to the reversal of the association – the effects of group participation on educational attainment of respondents.

*Nepal ever*” are combined into an index (0 = no travel, 1 = travel to Kathmandu and/or outside of Nepal) to segregate the effects of such exposure and its influence on gender attitudes. Similarly, opportunities for earning wages, through a salaried position or wage labor, is another crucial non-family activity that can on the one hand, bring economic benefits, but on the other hand, potentially introduce ideas of self determinism and self reliance in particular among women. Thus an index for work for pay ever (0=no job and 1= *ever had a salaried job*, and/or *ever had a wage labor job*) is created to control for its effect in the multivariate analysis.

Descriptive statistics for all the measures used are presented in Table 2.

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Table 2 about here

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### *Analysis Strategy*

Ordinary least square (OLS) regression procedures are used to estimate the multivariate models of egalitarian gender attitudes. This technique is applied using the dependent variable as a continuous variable with the assumption that the higher the value on the scale (from 1-4), the more egalitarian the attitude, thereby ordering it from lower to higher even though there is no numeric precision. Starting with a zero order model, nested models are tested, introducing the individual characteristics and variables representing new non-family experiences. In the first set of models the analysis is conducted with the individual characteristics as the basic controls and in the second set of models variables representing new non-family experiences are introduced in order to measure the independent effect of community group participation on egalitarian attitudes. Interaction effects are also tested between (i) gender and education, (ii) gender and group participation and, (iii) education and group participation.

The CVFS data comes from 171 neighborhoods comprising clusters of 5-15 households. This design is useful to study the neighborhood level effects on various demographic characteristic but in the case of this study which looks at individual level variances, there is a potential for cluster level effects on the estimates (Raudenbush and Bryk, 2002). Additional analysis is conducted to test for the necessity of hierarchical linear multilevel modeling to compensate for the clustering of data at the neighborhood. Proc Mixed in SAS is used to estimate the intra class correlation (ICC) as a first step. The results of the analysis show that the ICC is extremely small ranging from 0.011 to 0.038 for the different models. The parameter



estimates and t-ratios are also extremely similar to those of the OLS regression. Therefore the more simple OLS estimates are presented.

## **Results**

A brief look at the descriptive statistics presented in Table 2 show that among the 2,829 individuals considered for this analysis, 18% have participated in community group activities, of whom the majority are men (64%). The Upper Caste Hindu groups are the majority group at 46% and the Hill Tibeto Burmese groups are the smallest numbers at only six percent. While most of the respondents have had exposure to media which includes exposure to radio, television, cinemas and movies on VCRs, less than half of them have had exposure to travel to the capital city of Kathmandu or beyond the national borders. While education attainment is at an average of 3.25, this is one area where gender disparities are highest. The means for the four dependent attitude variables representing attitudes about marriage and gender roles are above the mid point.

The estimates of the association between community group participation and the selected gender attitudes are presented in Tables 3 and 4. In Table 3 results of the multivariate analysis for all four attitudinal variables are presented first in a zero order model and subsequently controlling for basic individual characteristics. The association between community group participation and attitudes about marriage and gender roles is extremely strong and positive. The introduction of basic individual controls for gender, caste, birth cohort, parental background and childhood neighborhood characteristics, reduces the effects as expected but the association continues to be strong and positive. Compared to those who have not participated in community groups ever, those who have, have more egalitarian attitudes in relation to child marriage, widow remarriage, daughter-in-law obedience and decision making in the household. On a four point scale of attitudes towards marriage and gender roles, individuals who have participated in community groups have at least 0.2 points more egalitarian attitudes and for all four variables the T values are significantly large.

As expected, the individual level characteristics including parental characteristics and childhood level contexts also have an association with attitudes. It is interesting to see that compared to men, women have less egalitarian attitudes in relation to three of the dependent variables - girls getting married before their menstruation, widow remarriage and about

daughter-in-law obedience to mothers-in-law – and in all three cases, the results are statistically significant. This is consistent with Barber's (2004) analysis and seems to point towards the deeper effects of discrimination in marriage timing and widow remarriage on women's attitudes as well as the impact of the practices in gendered roles within the family.

The differences in birth cohorts are also as expected. Compared to the men and women born during 1962-1972 (cohort 1), those born earlier in between 1951-61 and 1941-51 (cohorts 2 and 3), have less egalitarian attitudes in relation to child marriage, widow remarriage and daughter-in-law obedience. For individuals in the cohort 3 the association is statistically significant in the cases of attitudes about marriage timing and gender roles. The social and economic changes in the past 50 years in the Chitwan Valley are more likely to have affected younger people compared to the older ones who were born and brought up within a context of more strict gender hierarchies and role expectations, extremely limited educational opportunities and other new non-family experiences where new ideas could have influenced their attitudes.

The results also support previous empirical evidence of the influence of parental experiences and characteristics on the attitudes of children. The educational experiences of either one or both parents have a positive and statistically significant association with gender attitudes related to widow remarriage and more shared household decision making. But parents having any education do not influence more egalitarian attitudes about daughter-in-law obedience to mothers-in-law. On the other hand, the experience of parents with work for pay only contributes to a statistically positive association with the attitudes of the respondents related to men making the household decisions.

Studies have shown that attitudes in adulthood are also influenced in part by the neighborhood characteristics during childhood (Barber, 2004). The present analysis also shows a positive and statistically significant association between childhood context and marriage and gender role attitudes. For each increase in the number of childhood characteristics - the presence of schools, buses, cinema, employment opportunities, development programs, and women's groups within an hour's walking distance in the neighborhood – marriage and gender attitudes are more egalitarian. In the case of child marriage for girls, widow remarriage and role of daughters-in-law, this relationship is statistically significant ( $p < 0.01$ ).

These results thus support the study hypothesis that group participation has a strong and positive influence on attitudes related to marriage and gender roles while controlling for the individual characteristics of individuals.

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Table 3 about here

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Table 4 illustrates the independent and positive association between community group participation and gender attitudes after the introduction of additional non-family experiences of the respondents to the models. The experiences of the respondents with education, exposure to media, travel and employment all provide opportunities to be exposed to ideas that are different from the long established ones. In these models, the coefficients for the association of community group participation and attitudes related to marriage and gender roles are reduced, but the relationship continues to be independent, positive and statistically significant. On a four point scale of attitudes towards marriage and gender roles, individuals who have participated in community groups have a range of 0.1 to 0.2 points more egalitarian attitudes. In the case of attitudes related to widow remarriage and the role of daughters-in-law, the T values continue to be significantly large ( $p < 0.001$ ) while in the case of marital timing and men making decisions at home the T values are significant at 95 percent confidence levels. These results highlight the fact that this association is not the spurious consequence of other new non-family experiences of the respondents.

Predictably, educational attainment has the strongest positive effects on gender attitudes of all the additional non-family experiences introduced. Every additional year of educational attainment increases the propensity for individuals to have more egalitarian attitudes. The theoretical support for this effect is also quite strong (Caldwell, 1983 and 1988). Formal and mass education in the country has been influenced by the Indian education system and curriculum, which in turn was heavily influenced by the British education system, framework and content until quite recently. It is important to note that results for the relationship between gender and egalitarianism changes with the addition of these new experiences, mostly of which is attributed to educational attainment. For men and women with similar educational attainment levels, women have more egalitarian attitudes and this is particularly significant for attitudes related to only men making decisions at home.

Attitudes are known to vary for men and women as do the effect of non-family experiences. Given this, interaction effects are tested for gender, group participation, and education. The only significant relationship that resulted was the interaction between gender and community group participation, particularly in relation to attitudes related to marital timing (child marriage) and gender roles (only men making household decisions)<sup>8</sup>. Being a member of a community group has a significant effects ( $p < 0.05$ ) for women in terms of less egalitarian attitudes about child marriage (less egalitarian), and a significant relationship ( $p < 1$ ) in terms of more egalitarian attitudes towards only men making decisions within the household.

The effect of travel either to Kathmandu or outside of the country also provides new exposure to respondents, which has the potential to influence the attitudes of individuals and to make them more egalitarian. The results of the association of educational attainment and travel experience on attitudes are consistent with the ideational framework of how non-family experiences introduce new ideas among individuals, potentially influencing social changes within the family.

The introduction of additional non-family experiences decreases the magnitudes of the cohort effects seen in Table 4. Individuals in cohort 3 (born 1941-1952), compared with cohort 1, continue to have less egalitarian attitudes. This cohort was in still in their early childhood when Chitwan began experiencing the expansion of schools and it was later still that access to opportunities for paid work and to transportation services was increased. Hence the results are consistent with the theoretical framework that the introduction and experience of non-family activities and institutions become a key mechanism for the influence of new ideas.

Many community group programs have goals related to poverty alleviation and social equity. The upper caste Hindu group, the most privileged in terms of social, economic and political power and representation are markedly different particularly from the lower caste Hindus, Hill Tibeto Burmese and Terai Tibeto Burmese caste groups. The upper caste Hindus form the majority of the respondents (45%) and of the respondents who have participated in groups almost two thirds are from this group. Such limited representation raises questions about the effective outreach of such community group formation processes and about who the actual beneficiaries of such programs are. Yet the changes in the magnitude and direction of egalitarian

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<sup>8</sup> Results are not shown here but are available upon request.

attitudes with the introduction of the new experiences (particularly educational attainment) point towards the strong relationship between the influence of new ideas and attitudes about marriage and gender roles.

The magnitude and significance of the association between parental characteristics and the presence of childhood neighborhood characteristics (access to non family services within one hour walking distance in childhood of the respondents) and egalitarian attitudes also changes due to the influence of new non family experiences. The earlier association between community group participation and gender attitudes in Table 3 no longer hold in Table 4, as much of this earlier association seem to be working through the new non-family experiences of the respondents.

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Table 4 about here

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## **Discussion**

This study illustrates the relationship between participation in community groups ever by individuals and selected attitudes about marriage and gender roles, which are seen to be more egalitarian. Some of this association is a result of individual level characteristics such as gender, birth cohort, caste/ ethnicity, parental characteristics and childhood neighborhood context. The introduction of additional new non-family experiences such as educational attainment, and exposure to media, travel and work for pay helps to explain some of this relationship yet the experience of participation in community groups ever has an independent and significant effect on the selected attitudes. The impact of macro level changes on micro level behavior has been well documented and there is growing evidence for this in Chitwan as well, particularly in the context of demographic behavior such as fertility limitation, marital arrangement and marital timing. On the other hand, the influence of ideational factors on attitudes and behaviors has also been well document. This study adds to the literature by demonstrating the association between participation in community group activities, a relatively new non-family activity, and egalitarian gender attitudes among individuals in Chitwan. This information becomes more powerful when other potential spurious factors in the form of additional key non-family activities are introduced and controlled for.

The potential power of this information lies in the relation between attitudes and actual behaviors. According to the theory of Reasoned Action and Planned Behavior (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1988), particular attitudes towards a certain behavior makes the behavior more likely - one's own or other's attitudes can influence behavior. Hence if experience with community group activities is known to have a strong association with more egalitarian attitudes, then such attitudes could potentially influence actual behavior change. In the case of the attitude variables used for this analyses, it could potentially signal changes in behavior related to timing of marriage for girls, more acceptance of young widow remarriage, more equitable relations for married women with their spouses and their in-laws.

The results suggest that in the case of attitudes related to young widow remarriage for women, men have more egalitarian attitudes than women. This is important information in the context of Chitwan, where extreme gender disparities over many years have not only continued to result in poor life outcomes for women but have also deeply affected their own gender perceptions based on the customarily established norms. There are two issues to raise here. On the one hand, change in a broad range of gender attitudes and associated behaviors among women are likely to occur only when there is a more supportive environment for such change within the household and at the community levels. Secondly, having more egalitarian gender attitudes does not necessarily entail actual changes in behavior if the behavior in question, for example marriage timing, or widow remarriage, is still highly controlled by family members who may have different attitudes and beliefs that are still linked to long established strict social and religious norms that discriminate against women. But such egalitarian attitudes among parents and particularly mothers are likely to have an effect on their children. This analysis is beyond the scope to this study but this would add an important element to the current analysis.

An additional contribution of this study would be in informing policies about implementation strategies for programs that aim to improve the social conditions of women and children. At a broader level, such programs can have a critical role in influencing gender sensitivity and awareness of the rights of girls and women in particular within a context with high gender discrimination. The analysis here focuses on the influence of six different types of community groups, all of which have specific purposes and goals. Yet a common underlying philosophy of the community group approach in most similar contexts are related to reaching out

to women and marginalized group members, for greater social, economic and political equity and justice.

It is important to acknowledge the probability of selectivity playing a role in this analyses and this context. Individuals with particular attributes and more egalitarian attitudes may have been more likely to participate in community group activities, contributing to the strong association that has been observed by this study. This study attempts to address the potential for such reciprocal association by controlling for individual characteristics and for other new non-family experiences that could potentially have a spurious relation. The CVFS was designed to study social change thus there are relatively few key unobserved predictors to account for. Hence longitudinal data would be critical in providing a baseline measure, to study attitudinal changes after participation in community groups. This would provide a better understanding of the causal direction of such a relationship.

An in-depth look at the different roles men and women are adopting, their perspectives on how such non-family activities have affected their own perceptions of self, agency and power, and their own adaptation of old and new roles would provide additional insight as to how such attitudinal and behavioral changes are occurring, being adapted and being transmitted to other generations. While participation in local level community groups alone might not be instrumental in advocating for policy changes that are conducive towards marginalized individuals and groups, their evolution and integration into higher level groups, association and cooperatives can potentially have more force as a social movement for instigating change. Some level of such changes is already evident in the present context of Nepal and this presents opportunities for valuable, future research.

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## TABLES

**Table 1: Participation in Types of Community Groups by Gender, Chitwan, 1996.**

Types of Groups	Males	Females	Total
<i>Group Member Ever - Yes</i>	325 (64%)	187 (36%)	511 (18% of 2,829)
1. Women's Groups	9	114	
2. Youth Groups	43	4	
3. Small Farmers Development Program Groups	16	9	
4. Credit Groups	145	53	
5. User's Groups	35	2	
6. Other Agriculture Groups	84	15	
7. Other Groups	112	13	

Note: Individuals are members of multiple groups.

**Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Measures Used in the Analysis of Relationship between Group Participation and Gender Role Attitudes (n=2,829).**

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Coding</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Min</b>	<b>Max</b>
Child Marriage	1=strongly agree, 2=agree	2.56	0.84	1	4
Widow Remarriage ( <i>reverse coded</i> )	3=disagree 4=strongly disagree	2.23	0.90	1	4
Daughter-in-Law Obedience		2.16	0.91	1	4
Only Men Decide		2.07	0.86	1	4
Participation in Community Groups	1=yes, 0=no	0.18	0.38	0	1
<i>Respondent's Individual Characteristics</i>					
Gender	1=female, 0=male	0.50	0.50	0	1
<i>Birth Cohort</i>					
Born 1962-71(cohort 1, ages 25-34)	1=yes, 0=no	0.43	0.50	0	1
Born 1952-61(cohort 2, ages 35-44)	1=yes, 0=no	0.33	0.47	0	1
Born 1942-51(cohort 3, ages 45-54)	1=yes, 0=no	0.24	0.43	0	1
<i>Caste/Ethnicity</i>					
Upper Caste Hindus	1=yes, 0=no	0.46	0.50	0	1
Low Caste Hindus	1=yes, 0=no	0.12	0.32	0	1
Newars	1=yes, 0=no	0.18	0.38	0	1
Hill Tibeto-Burmese	1=yes, 0=no	0.06	0.24	0	1
Terai Tibeto-Burmese	1=yes, 0=no	0.18	0.39	0	1
<i>Parental Background Characteristics</i>					
Parent's education	1=yes, 0=no	0.02	0.15	0	1
Parent's work for pay	1=yes, 0=no	0.19	0.40	0	1
Index for Neighborhood Childhood Characteristics	0-6 = number of institutions	2.21	1.50	0	6
<i>New Experiences</i>					
Educational Attainment	0 = no education, 10=grade 10 & above	3.25	3.97	0	10
Index for media exposure	1=yes, 0=no	0.99	0.12	0	1
Index for travel exposure	1=yes, 0=no	0.44	0.51	0	1
Index for work for pay	1=yes, 0=no	0.65	0.48	0	1

Source: Chitwan Valley Family Study, 1996

**Table 3: Ordinary Least Square Estimates of Models Analyzing the Association of Group Participation on Gender Role Attitudes Controlling for Individual Characteristics, Chitwan 1996 (n=2,829).**

	Child Marriage	Widow Remarriage	Daughter-in-Law Obedience	Only Men Decide					
Participation in Community Groups	0.26*** (6.51)	0.22*** (5.08)	0.41*** (9.45)	0.28*** (6.19)	0.58*** (13.35)	0.34*** (7.96)	0.36*** (8.54)	0.21** (4.96)	
<i>Respondent's Individual Characteristics</i>									
Gender (Female=1)	-	-0.13*** (-4.22)	-	-0.37*** (-11.30)	-	-0.20*** (-6.33)	-	-0.02 (-0.55)	
Birth Cohort			Reference Group						
1962-1971 (Cohort 1, ages 25-34)									
1951-1961 (Cohort 2, ages 35-44)	-	-0.08** (-2.18)	-	-0.01 (0.23)	-	-0.11** (-3.02)	-	0.06 (-1.58)	
1941-1952 (Cohort 3, ages 45-54)	-	-0.17*** (-3.76)	-	-0.02 (-0.33)	-	-0.34*** (-7.41)	-	-0.19*** (-4.25)	
<i>Caste/Ethnicity</i>									
Upper Caste Hindu			Reference Group						
Lower Caste Hindu	-	-0.14** (-2.66)	-	-0.10+ (-1.87)	-	-0.33*** (-6.14)	-	-0.29*** (-5.44)	
Hill Tibeto-Burmese	-	0.07 (1.57)	-	0.01 (-0.13)	-	-0.22*** (-4.90)	-	-0.23*** (-4.97)	
Newars	-	0.19** (2.91)	-	-0.09 (-1.29)	-	-0.01 (-0.12)	-	0.14* (2.14)	
Terai Tibeto-Burmese	-	0.02 (0.46)	-	-0.20*** (-4.27)	-	-0.62*** (-13.61)	-	-0.41*** (-8.95)	
<i>Parental Background Characteristics</i>									
Parent's Education	-	0.04 (0.89)	-	0.12** (2.70)	-	-0.10** (-2.32)	-	0.07+ (1.67)	
Parent's Work	-	-0.02 (-0.66)	-	-0.01 (-0.40)	-	-0.01 (-0.15)	-	0.06* (-1.94)	
Index for Childhood Neighborhood Characteristics (presence of 1-6 items)	-	0.03** (2.12)	-	0.03** (2.02)	-	0.04** (3.05)	-	0.02 (1.27)	
<i>N</i>	2,829	2,829	2,829	2,829	2,829	2,829	2,829	2,829	
<i>R-Square</i>	0.0148	0.0409	0.0306	0.0847	0.0593	0.1703	0.0251	0.0790	

T-ratios in parenthesis. +p<1; \*p<0.05; \*\*p<0.01; \*\*\*p<0.001

**Table 4: Ordinary Least Square Estimates of Models Analyzing the Association of Group Participation on Gender Role Attitudes Controlling for Individual Characteristics and New Experiences, Chitwan 1996 (n=2,829).**

	Child Marriage	Widow Remarriage	Daughter- in-Law Obedience	Only Men Decide
Participation in Community Groups Ever	0.13** (2.93)	0.19*** (4.13)	0.21*** (4.82)	0.11** (2.60)
<i>Respondent's New Experiences</i>				
Educational attainment	0.04*** (8.08)	0.05*** (8.51)	0.07*** (12.49)	0.05*** (9.67)
Index for media exposure ever	0.17 (1.30)	0.01 (0.05)	0.22+ (1.72)	0.06 (0.48)
Index for travel experience ever	0.07** (2.14)	0.01 (0.15)	0.09** (2.73)	0.03 (0.95)
Index for work for pay ever	-0.03 (-0.70)	0.04 (1.03)	0.01 (0.34)	0.01 (0.17)
<i>Respondent's Individual Characteristics</i>				
Gender (Female=1)	0.02 (0.49)	-0.20*** (-5.17)	0.04 (1.10)	0.16*** (4.32)
Birth Cohort				
1962-1971 (Cohort 1, ages 25-34)	Reference Group			
1951-1961 (Cohort 2, ages 35-44)	-0.03 (-0.80)	0.05 (1.27)	-0.03 (-0.89)	0.00 (0.10)
1941-1952 (Cohort 3, ages 45-54)	-0.10** (-2.07)	0.07 (1.54)	-0.22*** (-4.83)	-0.10** (-2.15)
Caste/Ethnicity				
Upper Caste Hindu	Reference Group			
Lower Caste Hindu	-0.04 (-0.68)	-0.01 (-0.26)	-0.18*** (-3.42)	-0.18*** (-3.34)
Hill Tibeto-Burmese	0.11** (2.40)	0.03 (0.67)	-0.17*** (-3.78)	-0.18*** (-4.09)
Newars	0.17** (2.61)	-0.10 (-1.51)	-0.04 (-0.55)	0.12* (1.87)
Terai Tibeto-Burmese	0.13** (2.83)	-0.11** (-2.19)	-0.46*** (-10.08)	-0.29*** (-6.27)
Parental Background Characteristics				
Parent's education	-0.03 (-0.69)	0.06 (1.33)	0.00 (0.06)	-0.00 (-0.01)
Parent's paid work	-0.05 (-0.14)	0.00 (0.06)	0.02 (0.56)	-0.04 (-1.36)
Index for Childhood Neighborhood Characteristics (presence of 1-6 items)	0.00 (0.03)	0.00 (0.12)	-0.00 (-0.03)	-0.01 (-0.98)
<i>N</i>	2,829	2,829	2,829	2,829
<i>R-Square</i>	0.0684	0.1088	0.2222	0.1112

T-ratios in parenthesis.

+p<1; \*p<0.05; \*\*p<0.01; \*\*\*p<0.001