

## **Heading**

Football for the empowerment and education of girls in rural Nepal

## **Organisation**

Atoot

## **Country/ Region**

Nepal

## **Authors**

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## **Key Words**

Football-for-good

Girl empowerment

Gender Equality

Girl-Child-Education

## **Summary/ Overview**

AToot is a Sport for Development (S4D) programme that has been operating in Nepal since

Atoot was founded based on the need for safe and empowering spaces for girls that face inequality, discrimination and injustice in Nepal. Atoot contributes to the following UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 2030: SDG5: Gender Equality, SDG4: Quality Education, SDG 3: Good Health and Well-Being, and SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities.

## **Problem Statement**

Nepal is a country which grapples with significant gender inequality and gender-based violence (GBV).

While there are policies and documents promoting women's empowerment, the reality on the ground is starkly different, particularly in rural areas where Atoot operates. Ongoing challenges girls face in Nepal include:

- 48% of Nepali women say that they have experienced some form of gender based violence at some point in their lives, with 15% experiencing sexual violence. (UN Population Fund).
- 60% of girls in rural areas in Nepal are married as children (Girls Not Brides).
- Girls in Nepal are pulled out of school by grades 4 or 5 (UNICEF).
- Girls are often isolated in their communities and are given no decision-making powers.
- More than 200,000 Nepalese girls are involved in the Indian sex trade. (Kathmandu School of Law).

Atoot works in the rural area of Kapilvastu District (Province 5) in Nepal, which has one of the highest rates of child marriage in Nepal. In Kapilvastu, 62% of girls aged 10 to 19 get married in the district (Nepal Census, 2011). The national average is 41%. Kapilvastu also has one of highest rates of youth population in Nepal - almost 50% are under the age of 20 making the region a promising context of development. There is also a diverse population including many minority groups - Hindus, Madhesis, Dalits, Janjatis, Muslims, Buddhists, among others.

Throughout Nepal, traditional gender norms dictate that activities like physical education, sports, and other physical pursuits are primarily reserved for boys and men. Meanwhile, girls and women are typically confined to domestic roles, focusing on household chores, child-rearing, and catering to their husbands and families, a trend more pronounced in rural settings. Consequently, girls lack opportunities for play and have little decision-making power. GBV persists due to the absence of women's empowerment, as women are unable to voice their concerns or exercise agency in their lives. Their fate is often dictated by male relatives, both before and after marriage. Addressing gender equality, GBV prevention, and women's empowerment in rural Nepal is a formidable challenge, but PEPAS play a crucial role in helping address these interconnected issues. There is a need for sustainable, safe and empowering spaces for girls that face inequality, discrimination and injustice in Nepal.

## **About Atoot**

Atoot is a Sports for Development non-profit that uses football (soccer) as a tool to educate and empower girls in rural Nepal. Atoot implements a four-pillar model intervention which helps in reducing the gender

inequality gap by empowering girls and helping them find their own voice - which will enable them to stand up for their own rights and for those of others around them. Atoot's 4 pillar model:

1. Football (soccer) sessions: We conduct football sessions for girls aged 5 to 18, 5 days a week, which not only focuses on football skills but also on other soft skills such as leadership skills, conflict resolution, unity, importance of teamwork, time management, taking responsibility for oneself & one's teammates, using their voice, etc.
2. Educational classes: Atoot conducts daily educational classes in English, Nepali and Math, five days a week for girls aged 5 - 18. Atoot works with girls who are various learning levels. Currently we teach 3 levels: i) Illiterate, ii) Very Poor, iii) Poor. Our educational classes educate our girls in traditional and non-traditional settings where we allow the girls to learn in a fun, caring, nurturing environment, furthering the girls' learning capacity exponentially, which encourages girls' families to give them more opportunities and keep them out of early childhood marriage.
3. Life-skills workshops: Atoot conducts weekly life-skills workshops with girls between the ages of 5 - 18. Additionally, there are also spontaneous mini-workshop sessions which are conducted as and when the need arises. Life-skills workshops on various topics directly relating to the beneficiaries personal, cultural & societal issues, which emerge from discussions with the girls themselves. Engaging in group discussions around various issues such as the girl child, gender-based violence, child marriage, human trafficking, rights of children, hygiene, environmental issues, etc., give the beneficiaries different avenues to be educated about how to best fight against the norms set in their lives & society.
4. Community Engagement: Our regular community engagement educates the community about the worth of girls and what we believe girls can achieve with long term programming & participation. This builds trust within the communities and helps raise - & build - awareness & promote advocacy within the community about the grave social & societal issues affecting girls.

## Challenges

In the context of our work, there can be challenges of pushback from certain community members because of the societal and cultural differences. As we empower girls to recognize the societal barriers, fight for equality and exercise autonomy, some set of people may be triggered to see the progress and positive mind shift of the beneficiaries. This can pose a risk for girls of being harassed and victims of violence within their families and communities. There is also a challenge of retaining girls in the programming especially after they hit puberty (14-15 years of age). We mitigate this challenge through continuous community engagement and advocacy and awareness building about girls' rights and the importance of girl child education.

## **Successes**

Over 12 months (January - December 2023), Atoot engaged 250+ beneficiaries (99% girls, 1% boys) between the ages of 5 to 17 years of age and conducted 245 football sessions, 225 educational classes, 87 life-skills workshops and 75 official community visits; chats daily with several community members.

Through consistent programming, we have seen several changes (both subtle and overt) in the behaviour of our beneficiaries, which are slowly leading to a change in societal norms and mindset of the community, leading towards a more equal society for girls, indicating the success of our intervention. Some of our success stories are:

- Girls cutting their hair! Inspired by our dedicated staff members, our girls embarked on a daring journey of cutting their hair extremely short—a bold and unprecedented departure from the prevailing norms. In the communities we serve, girls are traditionally encouraged to maintain long hair, and short hair for girls is met with disapproval.
- Girls wearing shorts to football! Our beneficiaries have embraced wearing shorts during our football sessions — an unprecedented departure from their prior expectations.
- All beneficiaries started at a base of illiterate, very poor and poor educational levels. These beneficiaries are all first-generation learners. After a few months of daily programming, they began to comprehend, read and write basic English, Nepali and Math.

## Lessons

1. Strong community engagement right from the start is essential in ensuring long term self-sustaining programme. Grassroots community led programming is essential to ensure successful programming but also essential to build sustainable partnerships to better support long term change.
2. Consistent programming is key for overall holistic development of girls and long-term sustainable change in communities.
3. Building the beneficiaries' capacities such that they become future leaders of the organisation and their communities is essential for the overall development and attaining SDGs to build a more equitable world.
4. Exposure to different kinds of people, from different professions, different fields of education and different places helps give our beneficiaries a different perspective in life and expands their horizon and encourages them to dream big and write a narrative for their own future.

## References

Atoot, [www.atootgirls.org](http://www.atootgirls.org)

Social media:

Instagram- <https://www.instagram.com/atootgirls/>

Facebook- <https://www.facebook.com/atootgirls/>

Twitter/ X- [https://x.com/atoot\\_girls](https://x.com/atoot_girls)