# BREAKING BARRIERS: EMPOWERING WOMEN'S DECISION-MAKING IN NEPAL'S DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS

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## ABSTRACT

This research paper investigates women's role and participation in decision-making in development committees in Nepal and their representation in different development committees and situation of their participation. The study found that females are more likely to be involved in development committees than males. However, their representation of leadership positions is still low due to social and cultural barriers. Female views are not always considered equally in meetings due to their lower position in committees and gender. So, this paper highlights the need for gender, caste, and class-sensitive policies and programs that promote women's active participation in development program's decision-making process and address socio-cultural barriers to women's role in leadership in their communities.

**Keywords:** Gender Inclusion, Social-Cultural Barriers, Decision-Making, Women's Leadership

## INTRODUCTION

Social inclusion and exclusion are closely related to socio-cultural norms, values, and economic status, so social inclusion is difficult to discuss in isolation from social exclusion. According to the GESI (2017), social inclusion is a multifaceted process intended to guarantee that people who are at risk of poverty and socially excluded are given the recognition, opportunities, and basic resources required for full participation in the economic, social, and cultural facets of society. Moreover, it provides them with the tools they need to live comfortably and in accordance with society's standards. In this context, the term "excluded groups" refers to particular

groups of people who have traditionally been subjected to systematic exclusion based on traits including caste, ethnicity, gender, disability, and location. This classification also includes sexual and gender minorities that have endured long-term social marginalization (GESI, 2017). Social exclusion describes a state where, people can't participate completely in economic, social, political, or cultural life. The social exclusion process leads to the state being in a worse condition (Mayer *et al.,* 1958). Hence, the social inclusion policy has been implemented in every world country for sustainable development.

Nepal's new Constitution was formally adopted in September 2015, and it makes a commitment to eliminating all forms of discrimination, fostering the growth of a just and inclusive society, and advancing economic parity, prosperity, and social equity (Nepal Government, 2021). However, the importance and complexity of issues like social inclusion, identity politics, and horizontal inequalities in fragile environments haven't been given the degree of attention and scrutiny they need (UNRISD, 2015). In the Nepalese context, it is very difficult to address and meet the goals in this sector. Nevertheless, every countries around the world have been practicing to apply inclusion policy for sustainable development. Women's participation and their representation in decision-making positions still need to improve in many countries, including Nepal  However, the world's nations provide greater advantages for women, disadvantaged people, and socially excluded groups, as well as gender equality and social inclusion. In addition, it has also become part of the global debate on a new vision for sustainable development goals.

In Nepalese context, the Muluki Ain legally formalized the highly rigid and hierarchical caste system. It brought the Adivasi Janajatis into the system with middle-rank status (Amin *et al.,* 2010). Moreover,.it made problematic situation in participation  in some formal, and informal social and economic sectors. Based on the caste system, higher caste people excluded lower from decision-making. These group's economic and political power consolidation led to further marginalization of the non-Hindus (Amin *et al.,* 2010). It is the proscribed document which made vast gap among the Nepalese people.

Despite the abolition of caste-based discrimination in 1963, the social hierarchies and divisions remained, vesting more power and privilege

in the Brahman, Chhetri, and Newar caste groups in the hills region. Concepts of poverty, deprivation, and disadvantage have a long history. So, the Nepal government brought a universal primary education target to achieve the goal of reduction of social exclusion  (Society & Cancer, 2015). However, there is a tremendous challenge in social inclusion because Sue Vize, Els Goossens, & MacLachlan (2018) say that many challenges remain, not least the growing inequalities in many parts of the world. Political, social, and economic sectors are floweriest with women's participation. Women's participation in decision-making has therefore been acknowledged as an essential element of sustainable development and good governance.

In the same way, socio-cultural norms and values are the leading cause of women exclusion from social, economic, and political sectors in Nepal. It created a conflict in Nepal among society's higher and lower castes. Such conflict was a consequence of social exclusion in Nepal. During the ten-year political conflict, all social, political, economic, and physical infrastructure was ruined, and all political parties were ready to sit in discussion and made agreement.

In the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), everyone talked about building a 'Naya [new] Nepal' that was democratic and inclusive. The 2006 CPA preamble discussed a commitment to a progressive state restructuring to resolve the existing problems based on class, caste, region, and sex (Drucza, 2016). After that, all political parties made the Interims Constitution and carried out an inclusive democratic as well as restructuring the State to eliminate existing forms of  unitary structure to address the issues of women, dalits, indigenous tribes, women's role in gender, class, and madhesis, oppressed and minority community, and other disadvantaged groups, by eliminating class, (The Nepal Government, 2007). After that, Asian country-level obligations to ensure inclusive and equitable support to families with a focus on gender equality and empowerment to achieve the SDG goals (Thambiah, 2018). Now, every countries progress have been evaluated by SDGs evaluating wing. However, the Nepal government could not achieve the goal significantly. Nevertheless, the Constitution of Nepal (2015) guarantees inclusive socio-economic and political development, building an egalitarian and pluralistic society and eliminating all forms of discrimination. The new constitution is guiding new social inclusion policies, plans programmers, and other interventions to implement the

aspiration of the SDGs that 'no one is left behind' (National Planning Commission 2020).

Under the new federal constitution of Nepal, the design and delivery of local development policies effectively address gender inclusion because the design and delivery of local development policies effectively address patterns of social exclusion at both the individual and community levels (Noya & Clarence, 2008). It gives high priority on people participation in every public affairs. In addition social accountability tools have been implementing in local to central level. Due to the capacity constraint, people are unable to consume their rights. Discrimination related to class, caste, region, language, religion, and gender is challenging to reduce. However, all there tiers of government implementing inclusive policy after implementing federal system in Nepal to safeguard and advance social and cultural cohesion, tolerance, and peaceful attitudes, they are all sorts of racial untouchability. They also state their commitment to establishing an egalitarian society in Nepal is to built on concepts of proportional inclusion and participation to guarantee a harmonious society and prosperous economy, (The Nepal Government, 2021). Based on that policies and their commitment, all three levels of government providing opportunities in different social, economic and political sectors. But, they have not achieved significantly due to the different socio-cultural, economic, environmental, and political constraints.

Social inclusion encompasses broader concerns than those reflected in the Sustainable Development Goals. Each global goal-setting agenda must adequately address the multiple dimensions of exclusion a comprehensively promote inclusion, particularly given the diversity of circumstances around the globe (Mayer *et al.,* 1958). All inclusion issues are sensitive, but gender inclusion is the most dominant issue than the others in Nepal. However, other researchers has not conducted the research on impact on women from social inclusion policy in Nepal. Hence, this research aims to examine the total number of participation of women in social and developmental institution's committees, and their roles in decision making process.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on women's participation in decision-making in Nepal highlights several factors that limit women's representation in decision-making positions. These include social and cultural norms, limited access to

education and training, and political and economic marginalization. Despite constitutional provisions that guarantee equal rights and opportunities to women, gender disparities remain prevalent in Nepali society. This kinds of literature are presented in the following charts.

Flow Chart of Literature Review:
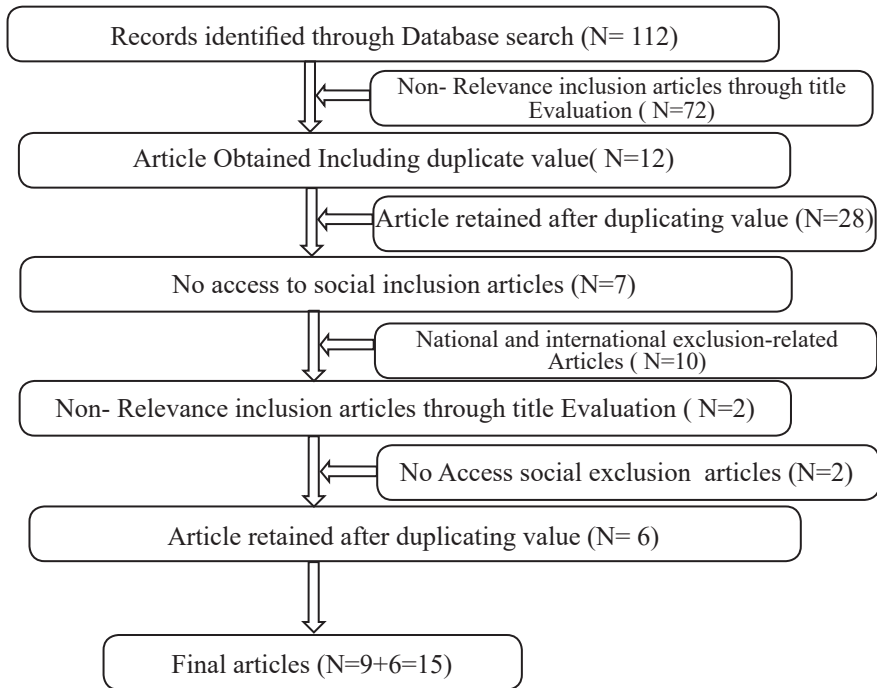


METHODS AND MATERIALS

This study is based on secondary data: Social Inclusion Survey 2020 which was conducted by the GESI team in Nepal. While they were conducting this survey, the first, they had done an In-depth desk review. On the basis of the desk review, they have scheduled key informant interviews and focus group discussion, and they have also collected primary data with representatives of the national, provincial, and local governments, the legislature and judiciary, the private sector, political parties, human rights organizations, the media, and top figures in civil society that address gender, caste/ethnicity inclusion, and vulnerability. This data sets were taken from the Central Bureau of Statistics. Only, the secondary data is included for analysis because it is a reliable and validated source of knowledge (Podsakof

*et al.,* 2005). Other GESI related literatures were downloaded from Google Scholar and reviewed. So, Google Scholar is oneb of the major source of data. Most of the reviewed articles and reports were published by authentic journal sources. However, books, magazines, news articles, and social media are not considered for analysis due to the absence of a peer review process, (Jones *et al.,* 2011). Only publications from 1989 to 2023 were considered to maintain relevance. The articles extracted from the source were organized in an Excel and SPSS database. The articles identified at the initial stage were then examined to see the numbers of social institutions, inclusion situations, and the role of decision-making. Data from the final set of articles included information about citations, authors, year of publication, design/technique, place of study, variables involved, and key findings. The researcher started with a preliminary review of relevant literature, based on which three keywords were identified for search in the electronic database. These keywords were: "social inclusion", "social inclusion policies" and "role of women and decision making". Those articles match these keywords and fulfill the social inclusion, social inclusion numbers, role of women, and decision-making in this study. Detailed exclusion numbers are presented in Figure 1. The initial searches on these keywords led to a listing of 112 articles. Out of which, we eliminated 97 articles after title evaluation for non-relevance to the objective of this study. The remaining 15 articles were examined for duplicate entries across the Excel and SPSS database.

## DISCUSSIONS

The results of this study indicate that progress has been made toward the role of gender in decision-making in development because the Nepal government have adopted an inclusive policy to maintain gender equality in decision-making. But it is still a long way to go. To achieve gender equality, a comprehensive approach is required that addresses the social and cultural norms that perpetuate gender inequality, promotes women's access to education and training, and provides support for women in decision-making positions. However, the authors discussed female association with development committees, holding positions, putting their views in meetings, and hearing situations only. These female associations with development committees, holding positions, putting their views in meetings, and hearing situation-related data are presented in this section.

**Table 1**

*Total Number of Respondents*

| Gender of respondents | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Gender** | **Frequency** | **Percent** | **Valid percent** |
| Male | 224211 | 49.7 | 49.7 |
| Female | 227188 | 50.3 | 50.3 |
| Total | 451399 | 100.0 | 100.0 |

*Source: Social Inclusion Survey, 2020*

The social inclusion survey team took a total of 451399 male and female respondents to fill up questionnaires. Out of them 224211 (49.70) percent were male and 227188 (50.30) percent were female. Those numbers of males and females were presented by authors to analyze the situation of women's involvement in different development committees in different parts of countries. Women's involvement in different development committees is taken as one indicator because women's involvement in committees provides opportunities for presenting women's views which influence decision-making.

**Table 2**

*Numbers of Development Committees of Respondents*

| Insolvent of respondents in development committees | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Types of committees** | **associated with committee** | | **Total** |
| | **Yes** | **No** | |
| Development construction-related consumer committee | 2967 | 19722 | 22689 |
| Agriculture and/or Livestock Groups | 1914 | 9922 | 11836 |
| Health Institution Operation and Management Committee | 350 | 10363 | 10713 |
| School Management Committee | 1317 | 21883 | 23200 |
| Community Forest/Pasture Land User Groups | 4005 | 8686 | 12691 |
| Cooperatives/ Local saving and credit groups | 7326 | 17428 | 24754 |
| Microfinance institutions | 2143 | 9862 | 12005 |
| Mothers Groups | 4431 | 16691 | 21122 |
| Gender-based violence watch group | 296 | 3982 | 4278 |
| Youth Club/Others | 1117 | 11613 | 12730 |
| Political Parties | 2018 | 23304 | 25322 |
| Ethnic organizations (including Dalit) | 4370 | 7548 | 11918 |
| Rights-based organizations, i.e. Human Rights | 104 | 2949 | 3053 |

*Source: Social Inclusion Survey, 2020*

We should know the types of development program committees in all countries and women's involvement. As, it helps to measure women's involvement. That involvement provides opportunities for putting their views to take decisions so it plays a significant role in the measurement of women's involvement in decision-making. Hence, researchers collected types of development committees and male and female insolvent situations in Nepal which is presented in table number two.

Generally, development and construction-related consumer committees, agriculture and/or livestock groups, health institution operation and management committees, School management committees, community forest/pasture land user groups, cooperatives/ local saving and credit groups, microfinance institutions, gender-based violence watch groups, youth club/ others, political parties and ethnic organizations (including Dalit) have been formulated by the government. In this formulating process, 33% percent of women including Janajathi, Dalit, and marginalized groups are included. This socially inclusive policy enhances women's participation in development programs which helps to promote the role of women in decision-making in Nepal. According to social inclusion survey, 2020, in development construction consumer committees in total there are 2967 male and female, 1915 in agriculture or livestock groups, 350 health institution operation and management committees, 1317 in school management committees, 4005 in community forest/pasture land user groups, 7326 Cooperatives/ Local saving and credit groups, 2143 microfinance institutions, 4431 mothers groups, 296 gender-based violence watch group, 1117 youth club/others, 2018 political parties, 4370 ethnic organizations (including Dalit) and 104 Rights-based organizations.

**Table 3**

*Total Male and Female Association with Committees*

| Gender | Associated with committee | | | | Total |
|--------|------|---------|------|---------|-------|
|        | Yes  | Percent | No   | Percent |       |
| Male   | 15705 | 48.55 | 87454 | 53.45 | 103159 |
| Female | 16653 | 51.44 | 76499 | 46.66 | 93152 |
| Total  | 32358 | 100.00 | 163953 | 100 | 196311 |

*Chi- Squire Test P-value is > 0.05*          *Source: Social Inclusion Survey, 2020*

When we observe Table 3, there is no vast gap between male and female associations in development committees. As we can see, among the 196311 respondents, 32358 respondents have been associated with development committees. And among the 32358 respondents, 16653 (51.44%) are female and 15705 (48.55%) are male. Similarly, among the 163953 respondents who answered not being associated with the development committee, 87454 (53.45%) were males and 76499 (46.66%) were females. The authors tested male and female associations with development committees using the statistical test chi-square. The chi-square test also shows statistically high significance because the P-value is 0.000.

**Table 4**

*Holding Positions of Male and Females in Different Committees*

| Gender | Chair | Percent | Other executive member | Percent | General member | Percent | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Male | 682 | 64.95 | 1969 | 62.77 | 13054 | 46.34 | 15705 |
| Female | 368 | 35.05 | 1168 | 37.23 | 15116 | 53.66 | 16652 |
| Total | 1050 | 100.00 | 3137 | 100.00 | 28170 | 100.00 | 32357 |

*Chi- Squire Test P-value is > 0.05*          *Source: Social Inclusion Survey, 2020*

Table 4 shows the numbers of positions held by males and females as chairperson, executive member, and general member. The maximum number of respondents are the general members, which is 28170. And among them, 15116 (53.66%) respondents are females, and 13054 (46.34%) are males. Likewise, 3137 respondents are executive members, out of whom 1969 (62.77%) are male and 1168 (37.23%) are female. Similarly, out of the total number of respondents, 1050 are chairpersons, and among them, 686 (64.95%) are male and 368 (35.05%) are female. It shows that the maximum positions of chairperson and executive members are held by men. It shows women are not still in leading positions. Similarly, females holding general membership are higher than males. It is not for decision-making because general members are merely passive followers of the executive and chairperson, with no genuine decision-making rights or authority. However, this situation gives women the opportunity to develop the leadership quality.

**Table 5**

*Putting Views in Meeting of the Respondents*

| Gender | Putting views in meeting | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Always | Percent | Sometimes | Percent | Rarely | Percent | Not at all | Percent | Total |
| Male | 4131 | 56.91 | 8023 | 49.36 | 1898 | 43.68 | 1653 | 36.74 | 15705 |
| Female | 3128 | 43.09 | 8231 | 50.64 | 2447 | 56.32 | 2846 | 63.25 | 16652 |
| Total | 7259 | 100.00 | 16254 | 100.00 | 4345 | 100.00 | 4499 | 100.00 | 32357 |

*Source: Social Inclusion Survey, 2020*

Table 5 shows how often women keep their views in mind in meetings compared to males. It is seen that out of 32357 respondents, 7259 respondents always keep their views in mind, out of which 4131 (56.91%) are males and 3128 (43.09%) are females. The number of women putting forward their views on a regular basis is 13.82% less than that of men. However, the number of females expressing their views in meetings is 1.28% higher than that of males. On the other hand, the number of female respondents keeping their views rarely is 12.64% higher than males. Likewise, the number of female respondents not expressing views at all is 26.51% higher than males. It proved that males are more active than females in decision-making. Hence, both authors claimed that association with committees significantly increased after the restoration of democracy, but that their role was mostly passive in decision-making in development. It shows that it is very difficult to meet the norms and goals of social inclusion policy as well as sustainable development goals.

**Table 6**

*Hearing Views of Respondents Respectively*

| Gender | Hearing views | | | | | | | | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Always | Percent | Sometimes | Percent | Rarely | Percent | Not at all | Percent | |
| Male | 4518 | 55.56 | 7591 | 49.19 | 1756 | 44.20 | 187 | 58.26 | 14052 |
| Female | 3614 | 44.44 | 7841 | 50.81 | 2217 | 55.80 | 134 | 41.74 | 13806 |
| Total | 8132 | 100 | 15432 | 100 | 3973 | 100 | 321 | 100 | 27858 |

*Social Inclusion Survey, 2020*

Here, the writers took hearing views as indicators of their role in decision-making because hearing views play a significant role in decision-making. While comparing views, 4518 (55.56%) males are always being heard respectfully, and only 3614 (44.44%) female views are being heard. Comparatively, female views are heard 11.12% fewer in meetings than those of males. Similarly, 7591 male (49.19%) respondents and 7841 (50.81%) females answered that sometimes their views were heard respectfully. There is no vast gap. However, 1756 (44.20%) males and 2217 (55.80%) females replied that their views are rarely heard. There are also 11. 60% of female responses that are higher than male responses. It means that most women's views are not heard respectfully, followed by 187 (58.56%) male and 134 (41.74%) female respondents who replied that their views are not heard at all. It shows the majority of females views are left unheard compared to those of males. It presents the social exclusion that still exists in Nepalese society.

**Table 7**

*Correlation Analysis*

| | **Correlation** | | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Correlation** | **Association with Committee** | **Women Holding Positions** | **Putting Views in Meeting** | **Respectfully Hearing Views** | **Types of Committees** |
| Pearson Correlation | 1 | .ᵃ | .167** | .ᵃ | -.035** |
| Pearson Correlation | .ᵃ | 1 | .306** | .263** | .030** |
| Pearson Correlation | .167** | .306** | 1 | .755** | .004 |
| Pearson Correlation | .ᵃ | .263** | .755** | 1 | .005 |
| Pearson Correlation | -.035** | .030** | .004 | .005 | 1 |

**. *Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).*

*Social Inclusion Survey, 2020*

Above Table 7 shows notable correlations between the variables under investigation are shown by the correlation analysis. Women Holding Positions and Active Participation in Meetings (r = 0.306) and Active Participation and Respectfully Hearing Views (r = 0.755) show a substantial positive connection (p < 0.01). This suggests that when women take on more prominent roles in committees, they tend to be more involved in meetings, which may have an impact on how respectfully their opinions are considered. In contrast, association with committee and respectfully hearing views have a minor negative connection (p < 0.01) (r = -0.035). This denotes that membership in committees alone may not always ensure that opinions will be heard carefully during meetings. Types of committees and other factors show modest correlations, with women holding positions showing a marginally favorable correlation. This indicates that membership in committees may not always translate into debates where opinions are heard with attention. There are subtle correlations between committee types and the factors under investigation, as evidenced by the mild relationships between the types of committees and the other variables, such as the slightly positive correlation (r = 0.030) for women holding positions and the weak negative correlation (r = -0.035) for association with committee.

**Null Hypothesis**: There is no relationship between position, gender, and hearing Views.

**Alternative**: There is a relationship between position, gender, and hearing Views.

**Table 8**

*Model Fit Testing*

| Model | Beta coefficient | R2 | T- value | P-value |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Views Hearing | 0 | 0.07 | 29.653 | 0.000 |
| Position | 0.26 | - | 44.506 | 0.000 |
| Gender | 0.04 | - | 64.406 | 0.000 |

*Source: Social Inclusion Survey, 2020*

In this regression test, researchers take hearing views as dependent variables and position and gender as independent variables and test their relationship by using logistic regression. The results show that if hearing views are constant, position influences 26% of hearing views in the meeting, and similarly, gender influences 4% of hearing views in the meeting. This model is fit for this analysis because R2 is close to one and the p-value is 0.000.

## RESULTS

- Women's association with development committees is higher than men's. This is because of the Nepali government's inclusive policy as well as because women's foreign employment migration rate is lower than that of men. It reduces male leadership roles in their communities.

- Women's holding of the chairperson post is low, despite women's high participation in development committees. This is the fact that females hold lower positions in communities due to the social and cultural barriers that prevent women from taking up leadership roles.

- Women do not always voice their views in meetings because of social and cultural barriers.

- The study found that women's views in meetings are not always given equal consideration to men's views due to the low post-holding as well as gender bias in the committees. Women who hold lower positions in the committee do be given equal opportunities to voice their opinions.

## CONCLUSION

Women's association with development committees is higher than men's in Nepal because of the Nepal government's inclusive policy as well as the male foreign employment migration trend rate. It reduces male leadership roles in their communities. However, women's holding of the chairperson post is low, despite women's high participation in development committees. This is the fact that females hold lower positions in communities due to the social and cultural barriers that prevent women from taking up leadership roles. Therefore, this research paper highlights the need for gender-sensitive policies and programs that promote women's equal participation in decision-making processes. It also emphasizes the need to address social and cultural barriers that prevent women from taking up leadership roles in their communities.

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