

Gender Equality in Sustainable Development Goals: Some Reflections from Nepal

Shushila Devi Khanal*,

**Ph.D. Scholar, Central Department of Rural Development, Tribhuvan University
khanalsushila000@gmail.com*

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Abstract

The paper examines the connection between gender equality and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It explores how gender equality is essential for achieving sustainable development and addresses the specific challenges and progress made in Nepal towards SDGs. Methodologically, the paper is based on the review and synthesis of secondary sources of information by explorative method. This paper mainly discusses the social, economic, environmental, and partnership aspects of SDGs in relation to gender equality and their contribution to human well-being and justice. It emphasizes the need for comprehensive and coordinated efforts to address gender disparities, promote women's empowerment, and ensure the active participation of women and girls in decision-making processes. Finally, the paper concludes by discussing the importance of integrating gender equality into policies, programs, and strategies aimed at achieving sustainable development in Nepal.

Keywords: Sustainable development goals, women, gender equality, SDG

Introduction

The concepts of gender equality and sustainable development are empirically blended and have been therefore discussed by many scholars (Dhar, 2018; Esquivel & Sweetman, 2016). Gender equality is an underlying principle that is essential for achieving sustainable development in the world. This paper largely focuses on four major dimensions of sustainable development goals (i) the social aspect, (ii) the

economic aspect, (iii) the environmental aspect, and (iv) the partnership aspect in relation to gender equality. Nepal, including many other countries, recognizes the critical importance of gender equality in realizing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set by the United Nations. This paper aims to explore the complex relationship between gender equality and the attainment of the SDGs in Nepal. By examining the existing literature and research, this paper will explore the challenges, progress, and future directions of gender equality initiatives in Nepal, with a specific focus on how gender equality can contribute to the overall achievement of the SDGs.

Understanding the interlinkages between gender equality and sustainable development is crucial for designing effective policies and interventions that promote inclusive and equitable development in Nepal. Nepal's National Gender Equality Policy 2020 prioritizes women's economic, social and political empowerment and their meaningful participation in all parts of society, and the elimination of gender-based violence and harmful practices (Dahal et al., 2022). Nepal ranks 106 out of 156 countries in the gender inequality index 2021. In Nepal, the inequalities faced by women in Nepal largely stem from socio-cultural, economic, and religious factors and influencers that define traditional roles and responsibilities between men and women (UNFPA, 2009). Figures indicative of women's inequalities in Nepal suggest that one-third of women have no education, fifty-two percent of women are involved in non-paid jobs, and women are less likely than men to own a home or land (NDHS, 2022).

Methods and Materials

The exploratory research method is applied to investigate gender equality to attain Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Nepal. This method allows for a comprehensive exploration of the topic, including the examination of existing literature, and analysis of available data. By applying the exploratory research method, the paper aims to provide a holistic understanding of the contribution of gender equality to the

achievement of SDGs in Nepal, identifying key challenges, opportunities, and strategies for promoting sustainable development and gender equality in the country.

Discussion and Analysis

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a set of 17 global goals adopted by the United Nations in 2015 to address global challenges and promote sustainable development. The SDGs incorporate a wide range of interconnected issues, within social, economic, environmental and partnerships for achieving the set goals. These goals provide a comprehensive framework for countries to work towards achieving economic, social, and environmental sustainability by 2030 (Fonseca et al., 2020).

The Women's Socio-Economic Empowerment in Nepal is politically contested (Upreti et al., 2020), It began in 1956 with the establishment of the Women's Training Centre. Although significant achievements have been made in terms of gender equality under Goal 5, it seems that more efforts are needed to achieve some goals. There has been an improvement in the representation of women even at the decision-making levels of the private sector. Women entrepreneurs are on the rise and one-third of women own property. Significant achievements have been made in the representation of women in elected positions from the federal parliament to the local level and at the policy-making level of the public service. Despite improvements in empowerment measures, inequality in wage rates persists. Little progress has been made in reducing violence against women and children. The incidence of child marriage has decreased. Women's participation in the labor force is much lower than that of men. The legal framework on gender equality favors women. However, its situation in the home and workplace is weak (MoF, 2023).

Gender and Sustainable Development Goals

Globally, gender equality is crucial for sustainable development. Societies with higher gender equality achieve greater economic

development, improved health and education, and overall well-being. It is both a goal and a means for sustainable development. Empowering women and providing equal opportunities lead to productivity, inclusive decision-making, poverty reduction, and stronger social structures. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have a standalone goal (Goal 5) dedicated to gender equality, and gender perspectives are integrated across other goals. This paper examines the global perspective on the link between gender and the SDGs, emphasizing the significance of gender equality in achieving sustainable development (Sen, 2019).

Gender Equality as a Cross-Cutting Theme

Gender equality refers to the equal rights, opportunities, and treatment of individuals, regardless of their gender. It includes addressing gender-based discrimination, promoting women's empowerment, eliminating gender-based violence, and ensuring equal access to resources, education, healthcare, and economic opportunities for all genders (Eden et al., 2021). Gender equality is not only a fundamental human right but also a critical driver of sustainable development. Gender equality is cross-cutting across all the SDGs, as it is fundamental to achieving every goal effectively. Research indicates that promoting gender equality has extensive positive impacts on different aspects of sustainable development. For example, gender equality is closely linked to poverty eradication (SDG 1) and inclusive economic growth (SDG 8). Indeed, women's economic empowerment and access to financial resources contribute to poverty reduction, enhance productivity, and foster inclusive development. Moreover, it seems gender equality is essential for ensuring quality education (SDG 4), good health and well-being (SDG 3), and reduced inequalities (SDG 10) in societies.

The government of Nepal developed the National Plan of Action for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (2016-2020). The plan of action outlines the strategies and actions to promote gender equality across various sectors. It focuses on addressing gender-based violence, improving women's access to education, health, and employment, and

enhancing women's participation in decision-making processes. The government of Nepal also has implemented gender-responsive budgeting to ensure that government expenditures address gender disparities and promote gender equality. It involves analyzing and allocating resources in a way that considers the different needs and priorities of women and men (Ranjitkar, 2019).

In 2022, the global gender gap index for Nepal was 0.69 index. The global gender gap index of Nepal increased from 0.56 index in 2007 to 0.69 index in 2022 growing at an average annual rate of 1.57 percent (WEF, 2022). This improvement became possible due to various women empowerment program and legal reforms for women's representation in the political space and decision-making process.

Empowering Women in Decision-Making

Women's meaningful participation in decision-making processes is vital for achieving sustainable development. The most common explanation of women's empowerment is the ability to exercise complete control over one's actions. Thus, women's empowerment occurs in a real sense when women achieve increased power and participation in decision-making, leading to better access to resources. Women's empowerment often involves empowered women developing confidence in their capacities. Hence, empowerment will not be stable but changeable (Shrestha, 2022). Studies have shown that gender-balanced leadership improves transparency, accountability, and responsiveness to diverse societal needs (Gipson et al., 2017).

The threshold by the constitution on local, provincial and parliamentary elections is a key breakthrough in improving women's representation in decision-making space. All major political parties have chosen about 40% of women as candidates in local elections. Overall, 36% of the total candidates were women; 4% of women among Mayors of Metropolitans and Municipalities, 78% women among Deputy Mayors, 3% women among Chairpersons of Rural Municipalities, 72% women among Vice Chairpersons, 1% women among Ward Chairpersons, 3% women elected

for unreserved Ward Member posts and 100% of women ward members and Dalit women ward members (Election Commission Nepal, 2022). This made it possible to have the current composition of the parliament with 91 women out of a total of 275 members. The initiatives in Nepal exemplify the commitment of authorities to ensure and effectively enhance women's representation in decision-making, political spaces, and leadership development at local, provincial, and federal levels (Adhikari, 2022).

Gender-Based Violence and Discrimination

Gender-based violence and discrimination remain significant obstacles to gender equality and sustainable development. Addressing these challenges is crucial for achieving multiple SDGs, including those related to health, education, and peace and justice. Violence against women and girls undermines their well-being and hinders their ability to participate fully in society (Pun et al., 2020). Efforts to eradicate gender-based violence and discrimination are critical for creating a safe and enabling environment that supports sustainable development.

A few initiatives were taken by the Government of Nepal, donors, civil society organizations, and International Non-government Organizations (INGOs) to reduce gender-based violence and empower women at different level. The National Women Commission (NWC) operates the 1145 support helpline and has experienced a surge in demand for GBV services during the pandemic (World Bank, 2020). Together with Legal Aid and Consultancy Center, Child Workers in Nepal (CWIN), Transcultural Psychosocial Organization (TPO) and SAATHI, NWC provides critical support to survivors of gender-based violence (World Bank, 2020). These initiatives are very effective in reducing gender-based violence and significant changes were noticed in recent surveys, reports, and government data.

Intersectionality and Leaving No One Behind

The concept of intersectionality was introduced to the field of legal studies by black feminist scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, in 1989 and 1991.

Intersectionality is still new in the Nepalese context. Different social, gender, and political movements have highlighted intersectionality in Nepal at different levels. Strong voices are coming to look at intersectionality before developing policies, programs and plans.

Intersectionality is a critical lens that helps to understand the complex relationship of gender and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Nepal. In this context, intersectionality recognizes that gender equality cannot be addressed in isolation but must be understood alongside other intersecting factors such as caste, ethnicity, class, and geography. Research by Pradhan et al. (2019) demonstrates that marginalized groups, particularly women from Dalit and Indigenous communities, face multiple layers of discrimination that hinder their access to education, healthcare, economic opportunities, and political representation. Therefore, addressing gender inequalities in Nepal requires an intersectional approach that acknowledges and addresses the interconnected nature of oppression and discrimination.

Nepal has made deliberate efforts to incorporate the concept of ‘Leaving no one behind.’ The fundamental equity-based principle of the SDGs has a strong resonance in Nepal, as the country has now adopted a forward-looking and transformative constitution with inclusive governance and a strong commitment to justice and the enjoyment of fundamental rights by all. The constitutional provisions, specific laws, inclusive political and public institutions, creation of dedicated constitutional bodies, social protection, and security provisions, growing public expenditure in social security and targeted programs for the vulnerable and marginalized population, are all positive strides to bring about transformation in the country. However, there are constant debates and discussions in this regard (Bhatta, 2021).

Gender Equality and Economic Development

Gender equality is not only a fundamental human right but also a key driver of economic development and achieving SDGs. Women's economic empowerment leads to higher productivity, increased

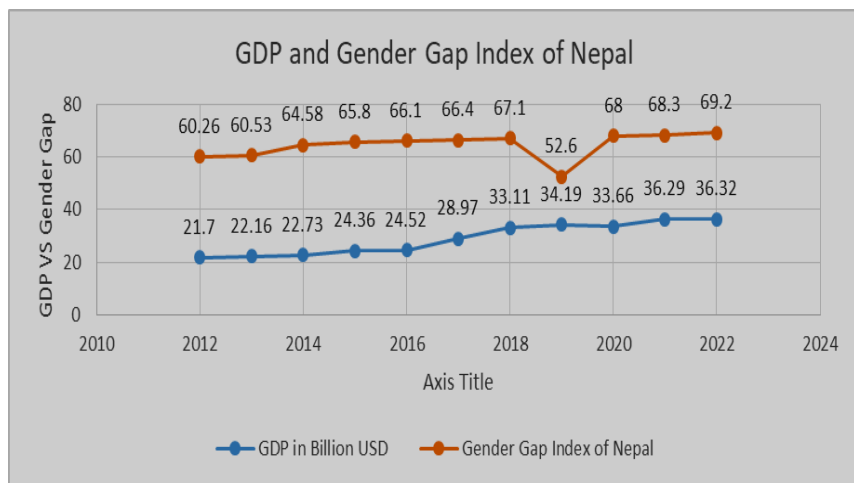
household income, and poverty reduction. Furthermore, gender-inclusive policies and practices foster a diverse and inclusive workforce, which drives innovation and competitiveness. Hence, achieving gender equality is not only a matter of social justice but also a key driver of sustainable economic development (IMF, 2018).

Gender equality is crucial for achieving sustainable economic development in Nepal. The gender gaps in education, employment, and access to finance limit women's economic potential and hinder overall economic progress. Additionally, investing in women's entrepreneurship and financial inclusion stimulates economic growth and poverty reduction. Therefore, addressing gender disparities and promoting women's economic empowerment is vital for unlocking Nepal's full economic potential (World Bank, 2020).

GDP Growth and Closing the Gender Gap

Achieving gender equality in economic development requires addressing the persistent gender wage gap. Women, on average, earn less than men across various sectors and occupations. As evident by the World Economic Forum, closing the gender wage gap is not only a matter of fairness but also contributes to economic growth. Research shows that reducing gender wage disparities can lead to increased household income, reduced poverty rates, and improved overall economic well-being (WEF, 2022). Implementing policies and practices that ensure equal pay for equal work is crucial for promoting gender equality and driving economic development.

Figure 1: GDP Growth and Gender Gap Index



Source: World Economic Forum & World Bank 2022

Economic growth has a positive contribution to narrowing gender disparity and improving the gender gap index. Figure 1 clearly states that the GDP growth has an excellent contribution to improving gender disparity in Nepal. Gender Gap Index in 2012 with the economy of USD 21.7 billion from 60.26 to 69.2 in 2022 with the GDP of USD 36.32 billion (WEF, 2022).

Entrepreneurship and Women's Economic Empowerment

Promoting women's entrepreneurship and economic empowerment is a key aspect of fostering economic development and sustainable development goals. Studies have shown that increasing women's access to financial resources, business networks, and entrepreneurial training can have significant positive impacts on economic growth and poverty reduction (Welter, 2019). When women are provided with opportunities to start and grow their businesses, they contribute to job creation, innovation, and community development. Supporting women-led enterprises through targeted policies and programs can unlock their

potential as drivers of economic development.

Policies of the Government of Nepal on concessional credit, women entrepreneurship fund, and deprived sector lending have created an ecosystem for enhancing women's entrepreneurship and economic empowerment in Nepal. There is a significant growth in number of women entrepreneurs in Nepal. According to Nepal Economic Census 2018, 29.8 percent of registered businesses are owned by women in Nepal. Similarly, the Report of Nepal Rastra Bank 2022 shows that outstanding concessional loans provided to 1,47,147 borrowers under the concessional loan program of the Government of Nepal stood at NPR 215.91 billion as of mid-June 2022. Out of this, the outstanding loan provided to 83,669 women entrepreneurs under women entrepreneurial loans stood at NPR .72.38 billion (NRB, 2022).

The global average score for Women, Business, and the Law is 76.5 out of 100, suggesting that approximately 2.4 billion working-age women are still deprived of equal legal rights as men. This seems better in the Nepalese context as 29.8 percent of Nepali enterprises are owned by women which are from both manufacturing and service sectors, as evident in Nepal Economic Census, 2018 (CBS, 2018).

Investing in Women's Education

Investing in girls' and women's education is crucial for promoting gender equality and economic development. Education is a key determinant of economic opportunities and outcomes. Research has consistently shown that increasing girls' access to quality education results in higher labor force participation rates, improved income levels, and better health and well-being for individuals and communities (World Bank, 2018). By investing in girls' education and addressing barriers such as gender-based discrimination and social norms, societies can unlock their potential and contribute to sustainable economic growth.

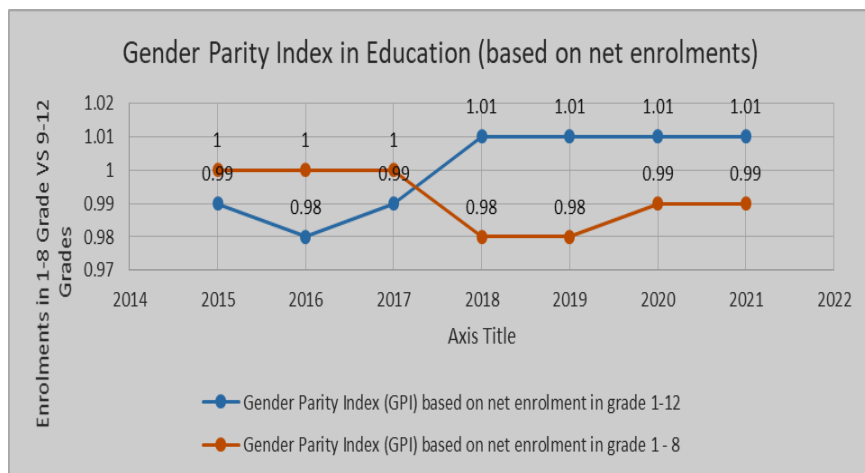
Investing in women's and girl's education in Nepal is critical for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Educating women

leads to improved health outcomes, reduced poverty, and enhanced gender equality, contributing to the overall progress towards the SDGs (UNDP, 2017). Beti Bachao Beti Padhao program of Madhesh Province, the Daughter's Banking Account by Karnali Province and the Diwa Khaja programs are becoming effective in accelerating girls' education in Nepal.

In the education sector, the School Sector Development Plan (SSDP-2016-2023) is being put into effect. This plan has given priority to achieving gender equality in education and is also expected to increase the enrolment of girls in early childhood education as well as retention rates. Similarly, Nepal has developed the National Framework for Education 2030 and the National Strategy for the Development of Education Statistics (NSDES). These two documents are meant to guide all three levels of government to make their plans and monitor the achievements of SDG 4. The government has also initiated a literacy campaign since 2008 in various districts, along with a day meal program where the enrolment rate or literacy rate is low. In order to increase access to education for persons with disabilities, the government has been implementing various programs, including scholarship support (Dhakal, 2018).

The gender parity index in education based on net enrolments is improved in 2022 to 1.01 from 0.98 in 2016 for grades 1-12. Similarly, from 0.98 in 2018 to 0.99 in 2022 for grades 1 to 8. The figure clearly states that the gender gap in school enrolment is satisfactory and improving (MoF, 2021/22).

Figure 2: Gender Parity Index in Education Based on Net Enrolments



Source: MOF, Economic Survey 2021/22

Conclusion

Gender equality is vital for achieving the global SDGs. Integrating gender perspectives across goals addresses inequalities and promotes sustainable development. Empowering women, combating gender-based violence, and ensuring their participation in decision-making are crucial for SDG achievement. An intersectional approach is needed to address the challenges faced by marginalized groups. Policymakers and stakeholders must prioritize gender equality for transformative change. Nepal has made notable progress in tackling gender inequality and addressing poverty, hunger, education, and health, though further interventions are necessary.

Gender equality is integral to economic development. Closing the gender wage gap, promoting women's entrepreneurship, and investing in women's education foster sustainable economic growth. Gender-responsive policies are vital in creating an enabling environment for

women's economic participation. By prioritizing gender equality, policymakers and businesses unlock the potential of women, driving economic development. Nepal has made notable progress in developing inclusive policies for gender equality in economic development. However, challenges remain in implementing gender-responsive budgeting, achieving equal wages, ensuring decent and safe workplaces, and improving work environments. Prioritizing gender equality in partnerships fosters inclusive and equitable development. Through partnerships with donors, private sectors, civil society, and women's constituencies, the government of Nepal can fulfill its commitments to gender equality and SDGs.

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