

## Gender equality in Nepal: How is it going as a goal of SDG?

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### Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between gender equality and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the context of Nepal. The paper aims to shed light on the multifaceted challenges faced by Nepalese society in achieving gender parity and sustainable development simultaneously. It begins by providing a comprehensive overview of the status of gender equality in Nepal, examining key indicators such as education, employment, healthcare, and political participation. The study then delves into the intersectionality of gender issues and the SDGs, analyzing how achieving gender equality contributes to the accomplishment of broader development objectives. It investigates the interlinkages between gender-specific targets outlined in the SDGs and their impact on poverty reduction, economic growth, environmental sustainability, and social inclusion in the Nepalese context. It uses a method of exploring and consolidating secondary sources to discuss how SDGs impact social, economic, and environmental aspects, emphasizing the significance of gender equality for human well-being and justice. It stresses the necessity of unified efforts to address gender gaps, empower women, and involve them in decision-making. The findings and recommendations presented in this paper contribute to ongoing discussions on gender equality and sustainable development in Nepal, providing insights for policymakers, researchers, and practitioners alike.

**Keywords:** Gender equality, SDGs, social inclusion, sustainable development

### Introduction

Gender equality stands as an indispensable pillar for societal progress and development. Within this framework, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) serve as a beacon, offering a comprehensive roadmap to effectively tackle gender disparities. SDG5, "Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls," reflects the ongoing and intensified

endeavors of the UN towards gender parity. This dedication is shown through important events, like creating the Commission on the Status of Women in 1946 (UN Women, 2023), agreeing on crucial documents such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in 1979 (OHCHR, 2020), adopting the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in 1995 (UN, 1995), and establishing UN Women in 2010 (UN, 2012).

The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) outline a blueprint for global development, striving to address multifaceted challenges and achieve sustainable progress by 2030. Many scholars have talked about how gender equality and sustainable development are closely linked and have been studying this connection empirically (Dhar, 2018; Esquivel & Sweetman, 2016). Gender equality is not just a basic human right; it is also an essential basis for a peaceful, prosperous, and sustainable society. Women and girls still face disadvantages and have restricted access to rights and opportunities compared to men and boys (UNDP, 2023). Integrating gender equality with sustainable development requires a profound conceptual understanding of both concepts and their relationship (Leach, Mehta, &Prabhakaran, 2016).

While Nepal has made significant progress towards gender equality in recent decades, persistent socio-cultural norms, resource disparities, and systemic barriers still hinder full gender parity across sectors (ADB, 2010). The 2020 National Gender Equality Policy in Nepal focuses on empowering women economically, socially, and politically, ensuring their active involvement in all aspects of society, and ending gender-based violence and harmful traditions (Dahal et al., 2022). Inequalities faced by women largely stem from socio-cultural, economic, and religious factors and define traditional roles and responsibilities between men and women (UNFPA, 2009). In the Gender Inequality Index for 2021, Nepal is positioned at 106 out of 156 countries. 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).

The aim of this paper is to analyze the relationship between gender equality and sustainable development goals in Nepal assessing progress, challenges, and policy implications. This objective provides a broad scope for investigating how gender equality intersects with the SDGs in Nepal, allowing for an in-depth exploration of progress made, existing challenges, and potential policy interventions.

## **Materials and methods**

This paper follows a descriptive research design to gain a better understanding of the topic. The primary focus of this paper is on secondary information, which serves as the main source of data. The collected data for this paper is qualitative and quantitative in nature, providing insightful and in-depth perspectives. To conduct a thorough analysis, the seminar paper combines theoretical literature with empirical data. Secondary sources, such as reports, books, journals, and research articles, have been utilized to gather relevant information. Some non-English materials have been translated to enhance the diversity of sources. By incorporating these various resources, the paper aims to present a comprehensive and well-supported exploration of the subject.

## **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).

Gender equality serves as a catalyst for development by empowering women, offering equal opportunities, and fostering inclusive decision-making, ultimately leading to increased productivity, reduced poverty, and

more resilient social systems. If gender issues are addressed in all Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), gender equality and empowering women could greatly boost human development (Odera & Mulusa, 2020). Goal 5 of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals focuses specifically on achieving gender equality, while gender perspectives are interwoven throughout other goals to ensure a comprehensive approach to sustainable development (Sen, 2019).

Research has addressed the interconnections among the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) but has tended to overlook the specific dynamics involving SDG5, which focuses on gender equity (Abualtaher et al., 2021; Miola et al., 2019). Additionally, many studies present conflicting models and approaches, leading to inconsistent conclusions regarding the costs and effectiveness of policies or actions aimed at achieving the SDGs. Many studies are mostly just repeating what others have already found, without adding anything new (Magendane & Kapazoglou, 2021).

The Women's Socio-Economic Empowerment in Nepal is politically contested (Upreti et al., 2020). Little progress has been seen in reducing violence against women and children. The incidence of child marriage has decreased. The involvement of women in the workforce is significantly less compared to men. The legal framework on gender equality favors women. However, its situation in the home and workplace is weak (MoF, 2023).

### ***Gender Equality and Education (SDG 4)***

SD advocates for the universal enjoyment of equal rights and freedom from violence and discrimination, as emphasized by UN Women in 2020. While progress has been observed in certain areas such as increased female enrolment in education, reduced instances of forced marriages, and higher representation of women in leadership roles, gendered contexts persist in policy decisions across various sectors like education and health (Morgan et al., 2020). Ensuring education for all has been a significant aspect of the

sustainable development agenda (Agbedahin, 2019). Failing to provide equal opportunities, participation in decision-making, and access to resources, education, and employment for approximately half of the population could significantly impede sustainable development and global prosperity, according to Dugarova (2018).

Wals and Kieft (2010) stated that globally, people are increasingly recognizing education for sustainable development (ESD) as a crucial part of good education and an important factor in achieving sustainable development. The Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology (MoEST) has developed National Education Policy 2019, and Sustainable Development Goal 4: Education 2030 Nepal National Framework to drive inclusive and equitable quality education and encourage lifelong learning opportunities for everyone. Enrolment of girls in primary and secondary education is increasing. However, despite progress, challenges persist in rural areas due to socio-economic factors, child marriage, and cultural norms that hinder girls' education (Gandharba, & Pant, 2023).

### ***Women's Political Participation (SDG 5 and SDG 16)***

When half of humanity gains access to education, proper healthcare, and active involvement in social, economic, and political spheres, entire communities benefit. Gender equality is essential for a world where every woman and girl can fully access socio-economic and political empowerment. This vision strives for universal human dignity and rights, marking a significant stride in advancing women's development (Leal Filho et al., 2023). Nepal stands out in South Asia for showcasing a comparatively higher level of female involvement in politics. According to the 'Women in Politics: 2023' report, Nepal holds 15.8% of women in its cabinet, marking a notable presence compared to its regional counterparts. Nepal is among the few countries in the region where women serve as heads of state. Despite challenges persisting across the region in terms of female political participation, Nepal's efforts stand as an exception, demonstrating a more inclusive approach to political representation (Hasan, 2023).

## ***Economic Empowerment and Gender Equality (SDG 8)***

Ensuring gender equality is not just a basic human right but is also crucial for driving economic development and attaining Sustainable Development Goals (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). The gender gaps in education, employment, and access to finance limit women's economic potential and hinder overall economic progress. 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).

### ***Progress and Challenges in Gender Equality***

The Brundtland Report (1987) played a pivotal role in establishing the initial framework for global change, outlining intentions, purposes, and overarching goals. Subsequently, the progression entered a new stage with the United Nations adopting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as the 2030 Agenda. This shift marked the incorporation of sustainable development into various economic policy domains to articulate specific objectives and goals. When addressing challenges and opportunities related to sustainable development, research has given comparatively less attention to the gender dimension, as evident in the current literature on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Magendane&Kapazoglou, 2021; Scharlemann et al., 2020).

Nepal's movement towards inclusivity is noticeable in its federal parliament, provincial assemblies, and local governments. This robust trend of inclusion represents a revolution, reshaping societal power dynamics and leadership structures. The representation of women at all

legislative levels signifies a remarkable shift. Certain important parliamentary committees are currently led by women. The rising participation of women in Nepal's security forces not only reflects a more diverse and inclusive environment but also showcases the breaking down of gender barriers in historically male-dominated fields. This changing landscape is highlighted by the increasing presence of women entrepreneurs, industrialists, and bankers in the private sector (Khanal, 2023).

Nepal has made commendable progress in advancing gender equality, evident in increased female enrolment in education, greater political representation, and policy initiatives promoting women's empowerment. However, deep-rooted societal norms and structural barriers persist, hindering the full realization of gender parity across various sectors. The nation's commitment to SDG 5 (Gender Equality) is reflected in constitutional provisions and policies, yet the translation of these commitments into tangible improvements faces hurdles. Despite strides in education, disparities persist, particularly in rural areas where cultural norms, poverty, and early marriage impede girls' access to schooling.

### ***Representation and Decision-Making***

Manandhar (2021) discusses the low levels of women's representation in decision-making and leadership positions in Nepal, with women making up only 33.2 percent of elected representatives at the local level as of 2017. Women hold only 15.8% of parliamentary seats in Nepal. She also noted the persistence of gender-based violence and discrimination in Nepal, with a high prevalence of domestic violence and rape. Even with the provision of 33 percent participation of women in the CA, in some cases, the influence of women in decision-making and constitution-building has been found to be limited. Men often do not acknowledge women's participation in debates and discussions on general subjects.

According to Article 84(8) of the Constitution of Nepal, each political party represented in the federal parliament must ensure that at least one-

third of their total elected members are women. While the constitution guarantees proportional and inclusive participation of women, achieving this goal remains challenging. Disparities also persist in societal perceptions of leadership, with the belief that men are more suited for leadership roles despite the presence of competent women leaders. The societal attitude towards women leaders has not progressed significantly.

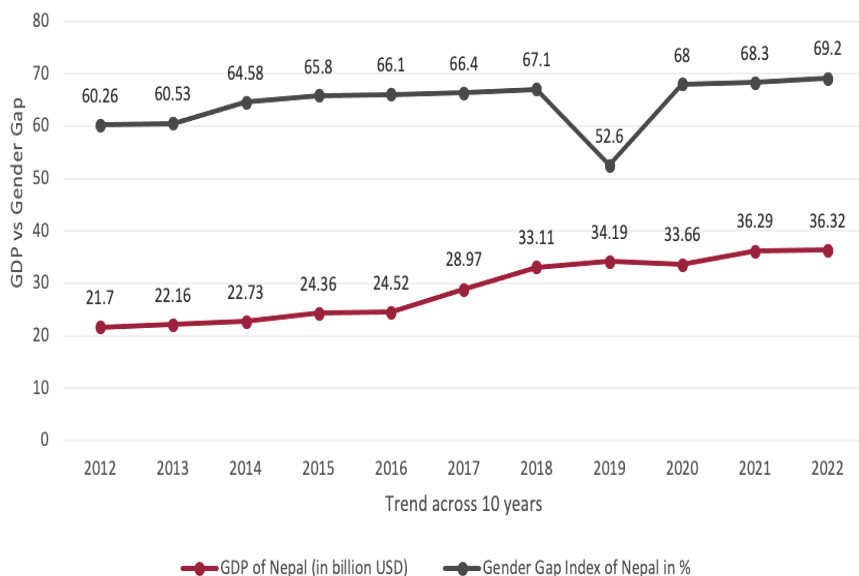
### ***Economy and Gender Parity***

Women-friendly policy is really important for countries to progress towards sustainable development and inclusive economic growth. The promotion of gender equality not only fosters the development of human capital but also drives advancements in labor productivity, facilitates job creation, mitigates poverty, and fosters comprehensive socio-economic progress. Enabling access to opportunities and investing in women's empowerment significantly contributes to boosting GDP. Despite Nepal's commitment to various international agreements centered on equality, social justice, and non-discrimination over the last decade, there has been a sluggish pace in effecting substantial changes concerning the increased involvement and representation of women in political, economic, and educational domains (Joshi, 2022).

The Gender Gap Index and GDP in Nepal show a close relationship where one influences the other. As the GDP grows steadily, and parallel pattern is observed in the Gender Gap Index, and the same happens in reverse (Figure 1). This suggests that Nepal's emphasis on policies concerning women's employment, reducing disparities in education and skills, and boosting women's education contributes to GDP growth. As a result, when the economy improves, it opens up more opportunities for women to participate in politics, society, and the economy.



Figure 1: Nepal's gender gap compared to GDP (2012-2022)



Source: Nepal Economic Forum 2022

### Women and Education

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 women's 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). BetiBachaoBetiPadhao program of Madhesh Province, the Daughter's Banking Account by Karnali Province and the DiwaKhaja programs are becoming effective in accelerating girls' education in Nepal (Khanal, 2023).

### *Healthcare and Gender Disparities*

In Nepal, gender disparities in healthcare access and utilization remain a pressing concern, particularly in the context of maternal health and reproductive rights. The multifaceted nature of these disparities is influenced by cultural norms, geographical barriers, and limited awareness, creating challenges for women to access quality healthcare services. Cultural norms in Nepal play a pivotal role in shaping healthcare-seeking behavior, especially during maternal care. Traditional beliefs and practices may influence decision-making processes, leading to delays in seeking medical assistance during pregnancy and childbirth. For instance, adherence to cultural rituals and reliance on traditional birth attendants may hinder women from accessing skilled healthcare professionals in a timely manner (Karkee et al., 2022).

Geographical barriers pose significant challenges, particularly in remote and rural areas of Nepal. Limited healthcare infrastructure in these regions makes it difficult for women to access essential maternal care services. The World Bank highlights the need for targeted investments to improve healthcare infrastructure in rural Nepal, emphasizing the role of accessible facilities and skilled healthcare professionals in addressing geographical disparities (GoNMHP, 2020).

Limited awareness about maternal health and reproductive rights further exacerbates the gender disparities in healthcare in Nepal. Women are facing a lack of information about the importance of antenatal care, family

planning, and other crucial aspects of maternal health. Community-based educational programs and outreach initiatives have been suggested to bridge this awareness gap and encourage women to seek timely and appropriate healthcare services(Nepal et al., 2020).

### ***Intersectionality and Emerging Challenges***

In Nepal, the intersectionality of gender disparities with other critical dimensions, including climate change impacts, the digital divide, and the experiences of marginalized groups, presents emerging challenges that require careful consideration. The digital divide further compounds intersectional challenges, as marginalized groups may have limited access to technology and online resources. In the context of gender, women from these communities may face additional barriers, contributing to a digital gender divide. Initiatives that address both gender and socio-economic disparities are crucial for bridging this gap, ensuring that women from marginalized backgrounds can benefit from technological advancements (Adhikari& Sharma, 2022).

The impact of climate change in Nepal is not uniform, and its consequences often disproportionately affect marginalized groups. Climate-related challenges, such as changing precipitation patterns and increased frequency of natural disasters, can exacerbate existing vulnerabilities among marginalized communities. Women within these groups, in particular, experience heightened risks due to their intersectional identities, requiring a gender-sensitive approach to climate adaptation strategies(Shrestha &Gurung, 2022).

Tailored interventions are necessary to address these complex intersectional challenges. Inclusivity in policy development and implementation is crucial, ensuring that the unique needs of marginalized communities are taken into account. For instance, climate adaptation strategies should integrate gender-sensitive approaches that consider the specific vulnerabilities of women from marginalized backgrounds. Furthermore, promoting digital inclusivity requires targeted efforts to

bridge the digital gender divide. Initiatives that provide digital literacy training, increase access to technology, and create safe online spaces for marginalized women can contribute to more equitable participation in the digital sphere (Chaplin, Twigg, & Lovell, 2019).

To combat compounded discrimination, there is a need for comprehensive policies that address the intersectionality of gender with other dimensions of identity. The intersectionality of gender disparities with other dimensions, such as climate change impacts, the digital divide, and the experiences of marginalized groups, poses emerging challenges. Interventions should be designed with an understanding of the intersecting factors that contribute to discrimination against women, emphasizing the importance of a holistic and inclusive approach (Bryan et al., 2024).

## **Conclusion**

In Nepal, the relationship between gender equality and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is crucial. Progress in gender equality contributes positively to achieving SDGs, as it addresses various social and economic challenges. However, Gender disparity and sustainable development are complex, showing both progress and ongoing challenges. Despite strides in political representation and education, societal norms and barriers impede gender parity. Nepal's commitment to Sustainable Development Goal 5 is evident, yet obstacles persist in decision-making, economic participation, and education. Low women's leadership and gender-based violence highlight the need for effective strategies addressing cultural attitudes. Economic empowerment is crucial and linked to Nepal's gender gap and GDP. Policies promoting women's involvement in politics, economics, and education are vital. In healthcare, gender disparities, especially in maternal health, demand targeted investments and community-based education.

This article underscores the intersectionality of gender disparities with climate change and the digital divide. Comprehensive policies are crucial to address emerging challenges and consider the unique needs of gender

and marginalized communities. Inclusive policy development is vital to integrate gender-sensitive approaches for women from marginalized backgrounds. In conclusion, achieving gender equality in Nepal requires a sustained, multifaceted, and intersectional approach, emphasizing ongoing efforts to overcome challenges, promote inclusive policies, and address emerging issues for a more equitable and sustainable future.

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