



Empowering Rural Women in Nepal: Overcoming Challenges and Promoting Gender

Equality

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Abstract

Women's empowerment is assessed through indicators like physical mobility, economic security, decision-making capacity, freedom from domestic violence, and political participation. Research shows that women with access to employment, greater mobility, and political involvement experience higher empowerment. These factors increase their bargaining power, control over resources, and autonomy. Education, employment opportunities, and political participation are key to improving women's bargaining power and overall empowerment. For example, educated women with employment opportunities and the ability to move freely have greater decision-making control. Policies that enhance employment access, mobility, and political engagement are crucial for fostering women's empowerment, autonomy, and gender equality, contributing to broader social and economic development.

Key words: Decision, Social Norms, Rural Women, Women's Empowerment.

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1. Introduction

Women's empowerment refers to providing women with the freedom and autonomy to make decisions that contribute to their personal and social development, ultimately preparing them to become future leaders in society. To empower women, they should be encouraged to become self-reliant, independent, and confident. They should also actively participate in efforts to improve society and engage in political activities.

In reality the 'women's empowerment is freedom in their choices, control and have equal footing in governance' (Book, 2013). Women "empowerment is a process of economic, social, legal, and political empowerment (ADB, 2016)". In Nepal, gender equality is emphasized in the Constitution of Nepal 2015, which outlines women's rights in the Preamble, Fundamental Rights, and Directive Principles. The Constitution not only ensures equality for women but also allows for positive discrimination to support their advancement (Greenstein, 1996). Women are an essential part of society.

They give birth to children, contributing to the active population of the nation, and play a crucial role in maintaining healthy and happy families. Historically, society has viewed men as suited for farm work while women were

confined to the home. However, women today are breaking these traditional barriers and overcoming societal challenges (Afsana, 2015). In the past, women in Nepal faced significant obstacles, including domestic violence, rape, sexual harassment, dowry demands, divorce, and other forms of abuse. To protect them from these challenges, women need legal rights with constitutional protection (Sharma, 1991-1992). Although Nepali women now have more rights and freedoms compared to many other countries, many women, particularly in rural areas, remain unaware of these rights.

Rural women, who are often illiterate, lack awareness about their legal entitlements. It is crucial to educate them about their equality, rights, and constitutional protections, as guaranteed in Nepali 2015 Constitution. 'Legal awareness is key to achieving gender equality in all aspects of society and politics' (Shetty, 1992). Education is particularly important for empowering rural women, as it helps them understand their rights and responsibilities within their families and society. Therefore, empowering rural women through education and legal awareness is essential for protecting their rights and promoting gender equality



2.Method

This study utilized qualitative data gathered from secondary sources of information. The research method, which is a critical aspect of any study, involved the

use of the library method to collect relevant data. Secondary sources, such as research articles, dissertations, and seminar papers, were reviewed to support and justify the facts related to women's empowerment in Nepal.

3-Obstacle of Women Empowerment in Nepal

Women in Nepal face significant challenges, including conservative social norms, cultural rituals, and economic and social barriers. They endure various forms of violence, such as dowry deaths, rape, sexual harassment, kidnapping, domestic violence, and more. These issues severely impact women's empowerment in the country. One of the most brutal crimes against women in Nepal is the acid attack, where acid or another corrosive substance is thrown at someone with the intent to cause harm. This type of assault is particularly devastating for rural women, as it creates significant physical and psychological trauma, halting their progress towards empowerment. Rape is another prevalent crime in Nepal. Following the notorious 2012 'Nirbhaya' incident in Delhi, which was highlighted the severity of violence against women' (Rajan, et al 2022). In Nepal, 'there were 1623 rape cases were reported, per day 6 rape cases and per month 185 raped cases were found out in Nepal' (Dulal, 2022).

Rape remains one of the most common crimes against women in Nepal,

severely affecting women's safety and well-being. Pornography, domestic violence, dowry issues, and sexual harassment also pose significant challenges. Pornography involves the explicit depiction of sexual content, often objectifying women. Domestic violence occurs when one partner uses power and control over the other through threats, physical harm, or sexual assault. 'Dowry-related violence continues to be a serious issue, with many families facing pressure over dowry demands. Sexual harassment includes unwelcome physical advances, such as touching, pinching, or making sexual demands or comments. Other social issues in Nepal that hinder women's empowerment include child labour, human trafficking, child abuse, and the sexual exploitation of children' (Janssens, 2010). These issues perpetuate a cycle of abuse and discrimination that limits the opportunities and freedoms of women in Nepal.



4. Theoretical ground on Empowerment of Women.

a. Economic Empowerment of Women

Economic empowerment refers to women's ability to actively participate in a country's economic activities, which not only boosts economic growth but also helps maintain the social dignity of women in the 21st century. It involves increasing women's access to key economic resources and opportunities, such as jobs, financial services, property, skills development, and market information. Women's economic participation is essential for strengthening their rights and enabling them to take control over their lives, thus influencing societal change' (OECD, 2010). Economic empowerment plays a vital role in reducing poverty. To improve the income status of rural women, various income-generating projects and tools need to be mobilized.

b. Psychological Empowerment

Psychological empowerment refers to the process through which individuals, particularly women, gain control over their lives and develop confidence in their abilities to influence outcomes. Empowerment is defined as "the process of influencing events and important decisions for an individual or a team" (Forrester, 2000). It is not a fixed trait but a dynamic process reflecting how individuals perceive their relationship with their environment (Mishra & Spreitzer, 1998). 'Empowerment, at the cognitive level, is often discussed more conceptually than practiced'

(Berman, 1995) involving beliefs in one's own efficacy. In general, empowerment enables women to exercise control over their lives.

There are four main categories in empowerment literature, 'which include personal feelings, power, self-determination, and cognitive factors' (Fulford & Enz, 1995). Psychological empowerment involves six dimensions: meaningfulness, professional development, independence and decision-making, competence and self-efficacy, and trust, all contributing to a sense of empowerment. The concept of "impact" or self-determination refers to an individual's perception of their influence over outcomes in both work and family environments. For individuals to feel empowered, they must believe that their actions can affect what happens around them' (Spreitzer, 1995). According to Himmelstrand (1990) 'Empowering women means providing real opportunities to be heard and to control work processes and outcomes, granting them genuine "choice" in decision-making'. Self-determination, as described by Himmelstrand (1990) reflects a woman's need to choose, initiate, and control actions, especially in the workplace. Organizations that support women's empowerment play a crucial role in raising their trust and awareness, providing them with skills, knowledge, and confidence to pursue their own developmental paths and



challenge existing barriers (Scheyvens, 2003). Empowered women, through these opportunities, can confront organizational

structures that limit their autonomy and progress.

c. Social Empowerment

Social discrimination against women is particularly pronounced in the Terai communities and the Mid- and Far-Western Development regions of Nepal. In these areas, women face significant challenges due to entrenched gender biases and limited opportunities. Social empowerment is crucial for improving the status of women in Nepal, where their rights and opportunities are often restricted by cultural, economic, and political factors. The situation is further exacerbated by Nepal's status as one of the least-developed

countries in the world, with a large portion of the population dependent on low-productivity agriculture for survival. This economic structure limits women's access to resources and opportunities, reinforcing their marginalized position in society (UN Women, 2022). Addressing these issues through social empowerment initiatives is vital for fostering gender equality and improving the overall well-being of women in Nepal.

d. Cultural Empowerment

According to Balti Wala (2007), 'empowerment involves gaining control over ideologies, beliefs, values, and attitudes, as well as over resources such as physical, human, intellectual, and financial assets. Empowering women is crucial for the well-being of individuals, families, and rural communities, and it also contributes to overall economic productivity, especially since women make up a significant portion of the agricultural workforce globally (UN Women, 2022). In Nepal, a developing country, most people live in rural or remote areas, which are often agricultural or forested. Women living in these rural areas are referred to as rural women. The term "woman" typically refers to

an adult female, as distinguished from a girl, who is a female child or adolescent (Wolf, 1992). Sullivan (1996) identifies several social and economic indicators that influence women's empowerment, including economic decision-making, purchasing capacity, control over loans, income and savings, mobility, political awareness and activism, networking, family planning, and the ability to manage spousal arguments and abuse.

Additionally, having well-trained parliamentarians, policy analysts, researchers, and civil society organizations is essential for ensuring successful legal reforms and policies that promote positive outcomes for women and youth. The study also highlights the role



of education and work in enhancing women's bargaining power. For example, studies in India show that higher female education correlates with greater bargaining power, including increased freedom of movement and improved maternal health outcomes (Malhotra & Grown, 2003). In developing nations, as noted by Mason et al. (2002), education and employment are key factors that improve women's status in society and

increase their authority. Similarly, studies in Western nations, such as those by Connell (1987), show that educated and employed women tend to perform more effectively in personal, social, and professional aspects of their lives.

5. Result and Findings

Women, especially in rural areas, face numerous challenges such as domestic violence, sexual harassment, dowry demands, and various forms of abuse. Legal rights and awareness are crucial for addressing these issues, yet many women, particularly those who are illiterate, are unaware of their rights. Legal education is essential for achieving gender equality and educating women about their responsibilities. In Nepal, women endure severe forms of violence, including dowry deaths, rape, acid attacks, and domestic violence. Empowerment involves providing women with the ability to make decisions, act independently, and control their own lives, thus improving their social, economic, and political status. Rural women play a crucial

role in sustainable development but face significant barriers, including limited access to education, credit, and healthcare, worsened by global crises like food insecurity and climate change. Empowerment means creating a society where women are free from oppression and discrimination. It involves improving women's access to resources and ensuring they can participate in societal and political development. Factors such as education, contraceptive use, and asset ownership contribute to women's empowerment by enhancing their ability to make decisions and participate fully in society.

5. Conclusion

Empowering women in rural areas is a powerful strategy to combat poverty. Women in these regions often face significant challenges, including limited access to

healthcare, education, financial resources, and decision-making roles. When empowered through education, economic independence, healthcare, and social engagement, women



can bring about substantial improvements in their communities. Empowered women contribute to healthier, more educated families, fostering sustainable development and resilient, self-sufficient communities. In Nepal, especially in Terai and the Mid- and Far-Western Development regions, social discrimination against women is more pronounced. Nepal's low agricultural productivity exacerbates the situation, leaving many women vulnerable. Women's empowerment indicators include physical mobility, economic security, decision-making ability, freedom from domestic violence, and political participation. Research shows that women with access to work outside the home have increased bargaining power and greater autonomy. Factors such as higher education, employment opportunities, political participation, and freedom to move outside the home enhance female autonomy and empowerment, leading to improved social and economic outcomes.



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