

Political Leaders' Opinions on Gender Empowerment in Nepal

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Abstract: Nepal has a very high gender inequality index, which needs to be improved through gender empowerment measures index in the areas of politics, workforce, and resources. The data for 1990-2023 reveal that Nepal's progress in gender empowerment measure indices far exceeds the targets for 2030, but the gender inequality index is far behind the milestones set for it, and is not anywhere near the target for 2030. This is because of a weak correlation between GII and GEM, where a unit increase in GEM contributed to reducing GII with a coefficient of -0.49 only. So a survey with the women political leaders (N=836, n=224) from municipal wards to federal parliament provided several policy choices to improve the GEM in its magnitude, quality, and equity. Accordingly, the ratings by political leaders on a scale of 10-1 for the pre-specified 31 strategies, the top-five strategies for better GEM are: address gender wage gaps, improve educational access and quality, amend election laws, mainstream deprived women of various social identities, and make political parties fair and democratic. The study offers many such strategies for a strategic action plan on gender equality through improved gender empowerment measures.

Keywords: Feminist Political Theory, Gender Inequality Index, Gender Empowerment Measures Index, Rating Scale, Inclusive Political Process.

INTRODUCTION

The importance of gender empowerment measures (GEM) lies in contributing to increasing the human development index (HDI), on one hand, and to reducing the gender inequality index (GII), on the Other. Indeed, Nepal has been improving the HDI by 1.32% annually during 1990-2023, despite its low status as 0.622 as of 2023 (which is a 145th rank among 192 countries). Meanwhile, the GII has remained as high as 0.487 till 2023 (UNDP 2023 and 2025). So, it is important that the GEM also be inclusive and that it should reduce the GII. Given this, Nepal's low HDI and high GII fall short against the ideals in the Constitution of Nepal 2015, SDG Plan 2015-2030, and 16th Plan 2024/25-28/29, and need to be reassessed for improvements.

Nepal needs to examine how the political leaders may contribute to improving the various dimensions of GEM and make it more equitable and inclusive. Such a task is important not only because GEM is a matter of fairness as well as a strategic imperative for higher HDI and lower GII, but also the realization of women and girls' full potential in the shared economic prosperity, social quality, strength and belonging within a community, and sustainable development.

Objectives, Hypotheses, Scope, and Organization of Paper
The Nepal SDG plan has targeted gender equality through GEM, GGII, and other instruments. So, the Plan aims to reduce the increase GHEM from 0.57 to 0.69 and to reduce GII from 0.49 to 0.05 during 2015-2030. So the study aims to find out ways to strengthen women's agency in GEM for reducing GII and improving HDI. So the present study has

five specific objectives as follows:

- To examine the trends of GEM and GII, and the contribution of GEM to GII;
- To find out the factors affecting party leadership's decisions on women's representation, inclusion and promotions by election methods, and the effective strategy for it;
- To prioritize strategies for increasing women's shares of managers, professionals and technicians, and women's control over resources; and

Based on the study findings, recommend priorities for a strategic plan of action on GEM and GII.

The study starts with a 'null hypothesis of no-discrimination' in the above relationships implying that: GII and GEM have strong relation; women's representations in legislature by proportional nomination or direct election methods are comparable; probability of progress from lower to higher levels are uniform for all population; all dimensions of GEM are uniform in their contributions to GEM; and ratings of all strategies to improve GEM are alike. The paper is based on metadata on GEM and GII and concentrates on prioritizing strategies from a political sociology angle through a survey of political leaders of principal parties.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 on literature review relates to the conceptual framework, GEM's dimensions and research strategy. Section 3 on methods deals with the rating scale on the strategies, study population, and survey design. Section 4 on results and discussion is organized as per the study objectives and

hypotheses. Section 5 on conclusion and recommendations emphasizes the ways forward and is followed by references.

Feminist Schools on Gender Empowerment and Conceptual Flow

The literature on feminist political theories has five different schools, namely, conservative feminism, liberal feminism, Marxist feminism, radical feminism, and socialist feminism (Ref. Fig 3.1 below, column 1-2). These schools differ in their world views depending on the social values, stage of socio-economy, and political philosophy. So in Nepal, there are two dozen political parties that show adherence to one or the other political theory. To simplify, the variations in these feminist political schools are around some core themes and concepts such as: patriarchy, gender roles, intersectionality, equality and empowerment, and

social justice. Thus, the figures present feminist political theories, dimensions of gender empowerment measures, and research strategy.

In the choice of GEM's indicators, firstly, the political decision-making indicators account for the parliaments and governments at the federal, provincial, and local levels. Second, it follows the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO) to account for the managers, professionals, technicians, and associate professionals (ILO 2024). Lastly, the control over economic resources is measured by using gaps in labor force participation rates and wage rates (Aryal and Bhatia 2025). Given the estimates of GEM indices, this paper is on the related issues such as understanding the behavioral response of the political leaders and parties on the state of GEM and GII, because these are 'agency-focused'.

Figure 3.1: Conceptual Framework and Research Strategy for GEMs

Political Schools	Main Views of the Schools	Dimensions of GEM	Research Strategy
Conservative feminism	Traditional gender roles within a framework of family and community; cautions on legislative measures for gender equality and conflicts with cultural norms.	Political participation and decision-making	Selection of political leaders across parties;
Liberal feminism	Equal rights and opportunities by legal and policy changes: gender equality in workplace, education, politics; domestic violence and sexual harassment.	Socio-economic participation and decision-making	Preset strategy based on literature, works of agencies, and country experience;
Marxist feminism	Individual advancement and change of capitalist system; dismantle capitalist structures and patriarchal norms.	Control over economic resources	Filter strategy with rating scale for ranking the priority.
Radical feminism	Patriarchy abolition and resistance, women's bodily autonomy, reproductive rights, and freedom from oppressive societal structures.		
Socialist feminism	Socio-economic equality and independence: equal pay, access to education; dismantle patriarchy, and intersection of class, race and gender.		

Source: Literature survey and authors' notes

Literature suggest that GEM contributes to HDI through various channels such as: i) Economic growth and poverty reduction via increased productivity, reduced poverty, and improved household spending; ii) Health and education via improved health outcomes and increased educational attainment; iii) Social and political inclusion via reduced violence, and increased political participation; and iv) Sustainable development via environmental sustainability, social progress. In essence, gender empowerment is not just about women's rights; it's about creating a more just, prosperous, and sustainable world for all.

The field of political sociology deals with power and domination in social relationships (Peter Burnham in Oxford References), and hence applies to women's political empowerment and gender and development issues. To begin with, the Weberian political sociologists focused on voting behavior in communities for the election of leaders. Lipset and Rokkan (1986) developed comparative political sociology to study the political systems and nation-building, the role of political institutions in social development, among others. Thus, political sociology applies to feminist political theory and its schools: liberal feminism, radical feminism, and socialist feminism.

On liberal feminism, Gutting and Frazer (2015) linked the identity politics with the gap between the rich and poor: the structure of capitalist society has a gendered, hierarchical division between 'production' and 'reproduction'; the gender asymmetries are intrinsic to it; so for the 'emancipation of women', one has to dismantle such structures. On the other hand, Zhang and Rios (2021) call for radical feminism to fundamentally re-order society in which male supremacy is eliminated in all social and economic contexts. Likewise, socialist feminism broadens the arguments of Marxist feminism about the role of capitalism in

the oppression of women and the theory of radical feminism about the roles of gender and patriarchy. As per Napikoski (2018), the socialist feminists attempt to integrate the struggle for women's liberation with the struggle against other oppressive systems based on race, class, sexual orientation, and economic status.

Second, the ILO's international standards of classification of occupations (ISCO) state that a society is more prosperous if women's managerial and professional populations and shares are high and growing. In Nepal, Adhikari (2016) studied the progress of women workforce from junior-level positions to management levels within an organization, and argued for family and civic education to change the family and organizations and corporate support mechanisms for encouraging women. Lastly, according to the European Parliament (2023), women's control over economic resources can be approximated by the 'earned income' from a job or self-employment. In Nepal, Prakash et al. (2024) found that the wage gap in Nepal is converging for the higher quintile groups but widening or stagnating among the lower-level earners during 1997-2017. They suggest investigating the psychological attributes of workers and the consequences of policy affirmative actions on wage disparities for gender equity. According to NSO (2024), wage income, also termed as earned income, accounts for 40 % of the household income. The surveys on the living standards and labor force provide some measures of the labor force participation rates, economically active population, and wage rates, which can be used to estimate the distribution of national income by gender. Lastly, on the strategic plan of action, UN Women (2021) suggests five ways to improve women's political empowerment: quotas, gender policy of political parties, inter-fractional associations and groups, mentoring, and training and leadership programs for women. It emphasized: amplifying women's voice and leadership to influence decision-making in public affairs, promotion of equal democracy; integration of gender perspectives in policies, actions, and institutions; strengthening women's leadership; substantive equality between men and women; and networks and alliances, resources, capacity, and knowledge.

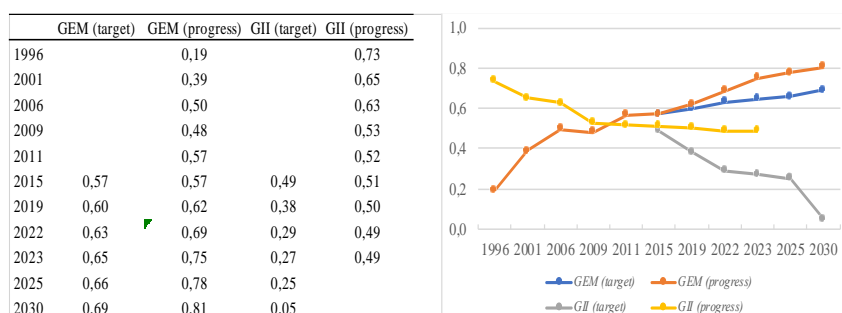
Study Population, Questionnaires, Rating Scale, and Data Analysis

The study population is the women leaders chosen through general elections to seats in the legislative bodies and government offices. The federal parliament, provincial assembly, Local Level Government (LLG) Chief, Deputy Chief, and Ward Chairpersons have a total of 9133 seats, of which women elected from various political parties were 836 in 2022 for the 2022-2027 term. The latter is the reference population for survey. Based on Yamane's Formula, the sample size for the survey is 271 for a 95 % confidence level, but the survey sample is over 225 depending on the availability of respondents. The study surveyed mainly in three provinces Madhesh, Bagmati, and Karnali to ensure representations of: ecological regions (Tarai, Hills and Mountains), linguistic groups (Maithili, Bhojpuri, Newari, Tamang and Nepali), religious faiths (Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist), municipal developments (rural, urban and metropolis), and levels of GDP per capita.

The survey questionnaires include strategies on the GEM's political, economic, and resource dimensions. The political strategies relate to election systems (direct or proportional) and promotions in party organization. The socio-economic strategies are about the managers and professionals. Strategies for control over resources pertain to earned income. For rating the strategies, the study applied the Likert scale modified to be: unidirectional, a 10-point metric varying from a maximum 10 to a minimum of one. It uses these numbers to estimate the mean, standard deviation, and t-statistic.

Progress in Gender Empowerment and Gender Inequality, Relationship, and Strategy

In estimating the GEM, researchers have emphasized the need to address 'limitations in accurately capturing gender disparities and its inability to reflect certain contemporary gender issues' (Hsu and Kovacevic 2015). The time series on GEM and GII with their targets, milestones can be found in Table 5.1 and Fig. 5.1 below. Firstly, the progress in GEM indices has exceeded targets as GEM was 0.75 against a target of 0.65 for 2023, and its progress is forecast to exceed the target for 2030.



Source: SAC (1998), GoN and UNDP (2014); UNDP (2009, 2025), NPC (2017, 2020, 2024), and Aryal and Bhatia 2025

Notes: (i) GEM (progress) for 2030 is extrapolated average of estimate of linear trend and non-linear trend ($R^2 = 0.90$); (ii) GEM (progress) for 2025 is extrapolated average from data for 2023 and 2030; (iii) GEM (progress) for 2022 is interpolated average based on data for 2019 and 2023; and (iv) GII (target) for 2023 is interpolated average based on data 2022 and 2025.

Secondly, the GII is as high as 0.49 against its target of 0.27 for 2023. The GII target for 2030 seems to be unattainable! Finally, an issue here is whether an increase in GEM contributed to reducing the GII? A regression of GII against GEM for 1996-2023 shows that a unit increase in GEM reduced the GII with a coefficient of -0.49, which is much less than desired (Eq. 5.1).

$$GII = 0.813 - 0.476 * GEM; \quad \dots \quad (\text{Eq. 5.1})$$

R2 adjusted= 0.819

t-statistic for slope: -6.101; p-value: 0.000

F-value: 37.22; significance level: 0.000

The sources of variations in GEM can be found in Table 5.2 below. Here, the contribution of economic resources (i.e., earned income share) in GEM ranges from Madesh as 0.31 to Bagmati as 0.74, with an average as 0.58 in the country.

Table 5.2: GEM Indices by Dimension and by Province 2024

GEM by dimension		All Nepal	Koshi	Madesh	Bagmati	Gandaki	Lumbini	Karnali	Sudur-Pashchim
1	Political power and decision making	0,76	0,85	0,79	0,77	0,71	0,79	0,82	0,78
2	Managerial & professional positions	0,91	0,94	0,70	0,92	0,97	0,91	0,93	0,88
3	Earned-income share	0,58	0,66	0,31	0,74	0,77	0,53	0,50	0,50
GEM indices (average)		0,75	0,81	0,60	0,81	0,82	0,74	0,75	0,72

Source: Aryal and Bhatia (2025).

Ratings of Strategy for Improving the GEM

Nepal has a mixed election system made up of direct election and proportional election for the House of Representatives (HoR) and Provincial Assemblies (PA), an electoral college for the National Assembly, and direct election for LLG Chiefs and Ward Chairs, and a de facto quasi-quota for LLG Deputy Chiefs. In the direct election, the question is: what factors do party leadership consider in deciding on candidates, and what affects voters' choices? In proportional elections, the question is: what explains the choices by party leadership to include women candidates and their priority? Within the political party, the question is: what considerations do the leadership apply to promote women political cadres for leadership and representation? The results from the survey of political leaders are presented in Table 5.3 (a)-(c).

In general, the politicians choose direct election over proportional elections because the MP of the HoR elected by the direct method can be the Prime Minister, and similarly, the legislator elected by the direct method in provinces can be the Chief Minister. Further, the lawmakers elected by the direct method are allocated the 'Constituency Development Fund'. Likewise, the Chief of LLG, or President of the Wards, can handle public budgets. So, representation by direct method is an indicator of a substantive measure of exercising more power.

As per the Election Commission Nepal (2023), the general election 2022 show that the women representatives elected by direct method are as few as 1.4 % or 115 out of 7991 positions in total: women elected are 5.5 % (nine out of 165 MPs) in the HoR, 4.2 % (14 out of 330 MLAs) in the PAs, 3.3 % (25 out of 753) in LLG chief, and 1.0 % (67 out of 6,743) in Ward Chairs; it is an inverted Pyramid!

Table 5.3 (a): Strategies on Women's Representation by Direct Election

Strategies for female representation at various levels (ward, municipality, province, or federation) under direct election (n= 209)	Mean rank	Standard deviation	t-value
1 Political parties promise to nominate more women for elections	7,9	2,3	51,0
2 Changes in <i>Election Act</i> to nominate women in 1/3rd constituencies	8,1	2,1	55,0
3 Reserve geographical constituencies for election among women	7,1	2,5	40,5
4 Political parties nominate women with higher education and wealth as election-candidates	5,7	2,7	30,3
5 Help elected women representatives to perform better in parliament, governments and local councils	7,2	2,1	48,8
6 Recruit more women as party cadres and leaders	6,9	2,3	44,0
Pooled	7,2	2,3	44,9

Table 5.3 (b): Strategies on Women's Representation by Proportional Election

Factors affecting party leadership on inclusion of women in proportional nomination for Federal Parliament and Province Assembly (n =208)	Mean rank	Standard deviation	t-value
1 Seniority of women leaders in party leadership hierarchy	6,4	2,4	38,1
2 Women as family member or relative of senior leaders in party	6,9	2,6	37,6
3 Women belonging to business, industry and big landlords	6,1	2,7	32,5
4 Contribution of fund by prospective women candidates to political party	5,7	2,7	30,8
5 Expertise of women leaders in law, government and developments	5,4	2,3	34,1
6 Women belonging to Dalit, ethnic and religious minority groups	5,5	2,4	33,7
7 Women belonging working class and peasantry	4,4	2,5	25,1
Pooled	5,8	2,5	33,1

Table 5.3 (c): Factors Affecting Women's Slower Upward Mobility

	Slow progress of female representatives from lower to higher levels (ward, municipality, province, and federation), and factors related (n=209)	Mean rank	Standard deviation	t-value
1	Short time of five years (2074-2079) to make progress to higher levels	5,9	2,5	34,1
2	Inadequate knowledge of women on law, government, and development	6,2	2,2	39,7
3	Voter's preference for male than female candidates for higher posts	7,3	2,2	49,0
4	Inadequate edn. of female representatives for progress to higher posts	6,0	2,3	37,7
5	Family issues (attitude of husbands, household responsibility, money)	7,1	2,2	46,1
6	Social discrimination (caste, occupation, ethnicity, religion, backward area)	6,4	2,3	39,8
	Pooled	6,5	2,3	41,1

Note: The sample size is 218, and the response rate is 96%.

Source: Field Survey 2022-2024

Based on the mean value (m) of ratings out of 10 points, the political leaders report the top three strategies for women's election by direct method as: 'Change the Election Act to require parties nominate women in one-third of the constituencies' (m= 8.1); 'Political parties promise to nominate more women for elections' (m=7.9); and 'Help elected women representatives to perform better in parliament, governments and local councils'(m=7.2) (ref. Table 5.3-a). Thus, the issue for direct elections of women in public seats relates to the legal-institutional, patriarchal, and human resource capability aspects.

The Election Laws statutorily require that women should be represented in at least 1/3rd of the total seats in legislative bodies, which is fulfilled mainly by the proportional method. So, the top three factors for women's election by in indirect election to the legislative bodies are: women as family members or relatives of senior leaders, as seniors in the party, and as belonging to the businessmen, industrialists, or big landlords (ref. Table 5.3-b). In other words, women belonging to the peasantry or working class have the least chances of being elected to political office.

In case of the party organization, legislative committees or government bodies, Nepal has very few women politicians in the top echelons. It has been so due to: voters' preference for male than female candidates for higher posts, family issues, finance, and inadequate knowledge of women on law, government, and development. In South Asia, Sarkar and Gupta (2024) reported similarly on entitlements and their violation, and Nazneen et al. (2019) reported on the nexus between economic and political power.

Managerial and Professional Population and Share

The Nepal SDG 5.5.2 seeks to increase the proportion of women in managerial positions from 27.5 to 42.0 % in aggregate during 2015-2030. Its sources are: private sector (25 to 45 %), cooperatives (50 %), public employees (11 to 33 %), professional and technical workers (24 to 40 %) (NPC 2018, 2020). So as presented in Table 5.4), the top four strategies to empower women in occupations are: Improve public education at low cost and with better quality to raise the number of professionals and managers (m=8.0); Provide concessional educational loans to women for professional education (m=7.7); and Support women/ girls with positive discriminations for professional education (m=7.7), and upgrading the Women Development Policy through a minimum-threshold quota for women from the Dalit, ethnic, and deprived classes (m=7.5). Kakar (2022) has similarly underlined the quality of the educational system and preferences for women's entry into university, and financial affordability.

Table 5.4: Strategies for Women's Manager and Professional Populations and Share

	Strategies for women manger and professional populations and their share (n = 207)	Mean rank	Standard deviation	t-value
1	Improve public education at low costs and better quality to produce many professionals	8,0	2,0	57,5
2	Support women/ girls with positive discrimination for professional education	7,7	1,9	58,5
3	Introduce minimum-threshold quota for women in managerial/ professional service appointments	7,2	2,2	47,6
4	Upgrade <i>Women Development Policy</i> to include more women in professional employment	7,5	2,0	53,0
5	Provide concessional educational loans to women for professional education	7,7	2,1	51,4
6	Among women, provide minimum threshold quota to Dalit, ethnic and deprived women (for inclusion)	7,2	2,2	46,9
	Pooled	7,6	2,1	52,5

Source: Filed Survey 2022-2024

Control Over Economic Resources and Income Earned

The Nepal SDG 5 seeks to improve female access to economic resources from 50.2 to 82.5 %, which will depend on wage equality, participation in the labor force, ownership of land and house, and internet use (NPC 2018). But, the improvement in

gender wage gaps is little at 66% (NSO 2019 and NPC 2020). The survey results in Table 5.5 suggest the top-three strategies for women's share in earned income as: Improve the parity of payments to females as compared to male workers (m=8.4); Train more women as managers and professionals in employment (m=7.9); and emphasize financial literacy and access to women, especially for women from Dalit, ethnic and deprived groups (m=7.7). Thus, the gender wage gap, opportunities for professional growth and development, and social justice are the topmost issues.

Table 5.5 Strategy for Income Earned by Women

Strategies to increase women's share in total earned-income in the constituency (n= 205)	Mean rank	Standard deviation	t-value
1 Improve parity of payments to females as compared to male workers	8,4	2,0	61,0
2 Train more women as managers and professionals in employment	7,9	1,9	59,3
3 Increases share of women in the total work force	7,6	2,1	52,6
4 Support more to develop their business start-ups	7,5	2,0	53,5
5 Influence the bank and financial institutions to provide more capital to women for industry and commerce	7,5	2,2	48,8
6 Emphasize financial literacy and access to women, especially for women from Dalit, ethnic and deprived groups	7,7	2,1	51,7
Pooled	7,8	2,0	54,5

Source: Field Survey 2022-2024

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The UN Nepal SDG 5: Gender Equality includes indicators such as the gender empowerment measures indices (GEM) and gender inequality indices (GII), which are studied here. The study aimed to track their progress relative to the targets, their intercorrelations, and a set of strategies to improve them. In doing so, it has developed a conceptual flow diagram creating an interface among the feminist political theories, GEM's dimensions, and research strategy. The study begins by collating time series on GEM and GII, expressing the reduction of GII as a function of GEM, assessing the GEM by its sub-indices (politics, occupations and income) across the provinces, and a survey of political leaders on rating the strategies to improve the GEM's dimensions.

The progress in GEM is found as greater than its target, ahead of schedule, and on track for the 2030 target. Conversely, the progress on GII is quite off-mark, and may not all reach its target for 2030. It is also observed that a unit increase in the GEM may cause the GII to decline by a coefficient of (-) 0.48, which is not only far below the expectations but also raises questions about the efficacy of GEM itself.

Given the above, the survey findings shed light on the strategies to improve the GEM in terms of its level, quality, and justice or equity through a survey of political leaders (n=224, response rate 94%). Interestingly, the determinants of GEM through analysis of metadata and the present survey both converge to the same conclusions: the most constraining factor to improve GEM is women's are found as limited access to and control over economic resources, and a lack of conducive institutional-legal ecology for female representation through direct election methods. And, in its absence, there is evidence of malfunctions in the nomination of candidates by the indirect election methods.

Following from the above core findings, the study recommends that more attention should be paid to substantive gender equality, improve the correlation between GEM and GII, ease the systemic constraints, and evolve an enabling ecology in support of women from the deprived social identities. More specifically, some instrumental recommendations can be prioritized as follows: (i) Improve parity of payments to female workers vis-a-vis male workers; (ii) Amend the Election Act by requiring the party to nominate women in 1/3rd of the constituencies; (iii) Improve public education at low costs, but to enhance quality by producing more professionals; (iv) Political parties promise to nominate more women for direct elections, and avoid nomination of women as family members or relatives of senior leaders in the party, and address traditional voters' preference for male rather than female candidates for higher posts; (v) Provide concessional educational finance to women for professional education, and support women/ girls through positive discrimination for professional education; and (vi) Train more women as managers and professionals in employment; and emphasize financial literacy and access to women, especially for women from Dalit, ethnic, and deprived groups.

The strategies thus prioritized are important to focus on economic justice, political democracy, and human capability. These ways forward can be an important input for the stakeholders to develop a strategic plan of action on gender equality through improved gender empowerment in quantity, quality, and fairness.

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