

Policy Perspectives of the Nepali Congress Party on Women and Children in Nepal

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Abstract

This article examines the policy perspectives of the Nepali Congress (NC) on women and children in Nepal. The well-being of women and children has a direct impact on social and economic progress. As Nepal's oldest and largest mainstream political party, the NC's ideological foundation is rooted in liberalism, emphasising individual freedom, democratic governance, and fundamental rights. The study employs a qualitative approach, relying solely on secondary data from scholarly articles, books, party manifestos (specifically the 2022 Election Manifesto), and party statutes.

The findings reveal that the NC possesses a comprehensive policy framework dedicated to the welfare and empowerment of women and children, consistent with its democratic socialist ideology and constitutional mandates. Key policy areas include commitments to inclusion and proportional representation across state structures, advocating for equitable citizenship rights, and ensuring 33% women's representation within party structures from central to local levels. In health and education, the NC pledges universal free basic and secondary education, targeted support for marginalised groups, universal health insurance, free treatment for young children and the elderly, and extensive maternal and child health programs, including "Pregnancy to Death" and "Golden Thousand Days." For economic empowerment and social security, initiatives include skills training and microcredit for women, a "from Cradle to Grave" social security system, and job creation with employment guarantees. Furthermore, the party demonstrates a strong commitment to protecting women and children from exploitation and abuse, focusing on human trafficking and child labour through strengthened legal frameworks and rehabilitation efforts.

Despite these articulated commitments, the study highlights a significant gap between policy pronouncement and actual implementation. Challenges identified include a persistent patriarchal mindset leading to male-dominated high-level policy-making, weak enforcement of existing laws, insufficient resource allocation, and the enduring impact of traditional norms. Issues such as prevalent child labour linked to poverty and women's disproportionate representation in vulnerable, informal employment underscore these implementation deficits.

Keywords

Nepali Congress, women and children policy, inclusion, empowerment, democracy.

Introduction

Women and children constitute essential pillars of society, yet they continue to be among its most marginalised groups, facing systemic barriers to equal rights, representation, and opportunities. In Nepal, systemic inequalities, socio-cultural norms, and institutional limitations continue to reinforce their marginalisation. As a result, addressing the rights and welfare of women and children is not only a matter of social justice but also a critical requirement for inclusive and democratic governance. Women and children play crucial roles in Nepal's development and policy discourse, as their well-being directly influences the nation's social and economic progress. Inclusive policies that prioritise their health, education, and empowerment are essential for achieving sustainable and equitable growth. Recognising their voices in policy discourse ensures that development strategies are more representative, just, and effective. Women are necessary for sustainable development, as they make significant contributions to agriculture and livestock management while balancing their reproductive and community roles (Thapa, 1997). Their empowerment strongly correlates with child well-being, even surpassing wealth indicators (Panday, 2020). Women and children are central to Nepal's development, with programs like the Child Grant showing that empowering mothers improves child welfare and family well-being. While such initiatives enhance women's autonomy and social participation, they cannot dismantle entrenched gender inequalities. A holistic approach that combines economic support with education, capacity-building, and social empowerment is essential for achieving lasting change (Hatlebakk & Gurung, 2016; Kadel, 2018).

A political party is a group united by ideology to gain and maintain political power through elections (Heywood, 2019). It functions as a vital intermediary between society and the state, translating citizen demands into public policy (Lawson, 1980; Stokes, 1999), serving as a bridge between the public demands (inputs) and the actions of the political system (outputs) (Almond & Powell, 1966). Parties organise opinion, mobilise voters, select candidates, and shape policy (Mair, 2005); operate representative democracy, provide structure to electoral competition, form governments (Sartori, 2005), aggregate interests, recruit leaders, formulate public policies (Stokes, 1999), and legitimise democracy (Mair, 1997). Their ideological discipline affects governance (Panebianco, 1988), and they have adapted to global and media shifts (Katz & Mair, 1995). In developing democracies, they foster political learning and manage conflict (Randall & Svåsand, 2002), though declining voter affiliation raises concerns (Dalton & Wattenberg, 2000). Despite critiques of elitism, parties remain vital to democratic stability (Aldrich, 1995).

Nepal's experience with political parties is relatively recent in historical terms. Among the existing political parties, the NC holds the distinction of being the oldest (Hachhethu, 2006). The NC was formed in 1947, resulting from the unification of the Nepali National Congress and the Nepal Democratic Congress. Since its inception, the NC has remained

an enduring political force in Nepal. NC's ideological doctrines are democratic socialism and centrist pragmatism. The NC officially adopted democratic socialism as its foundation, emphasising a synthesis of socio-economic equity and democratic governance, inspired by B. P. Koirala. NC's declared ideology endorses a welfare-oriented state, equitable access to resources, and public-sector initiatives to support disadvantaged groups while maintaining democratic freedoms and political pluralism. However, by the 1990s, the party began adopting elements of economic liberalisation and market-oriented reforms, aligning with third-way politics that softened its earlier social democratic positions and reflected broader global ideological trends. Ideologically, the party upholds the principles of representative democracy and has consistently advocated for democratic socialism, while maintaining a clear ideological distance from communism (Nepali Congress, 2018).

NC stands as one of the most influential political parties in Nepal, having played a pivotal role in shaping the country's modern political landscape. The NC has historically emphasised democratic reform, social justice, and inclusion, actively shaping Nepal's political and social landscape over seven decades. In terms of democratic reform, the party has been the leading force behind major transformations. NC's decisive contribution to the overthrow of the century-long autocratic Rana regime in 1951 marked a transformative moment in Nepal's democratic trajectory. Subsequently, the NC emerged as a key force in opposing the party-less Panchayat system and resisting monarchical interventions deemed regressive to democratic development (1990), as well as in the successful restoration of full democracy in 2006. NC also led Nepal's peace process to integrate the Maoists. The Paradigm Shift to a Republic, initially supporting a constitutional monarchy, saw the NC officially adopt federal republicanism in 2007–08, promulgating a new constitution under their leadership, reflecting its adaptation to post-monarchy political realities and democratic goals (Khatriwada, 2023). The party has consistently championed the principles of representative democracy, constitutionalism, political pluralism, and civil liberties. It has also maintained a firm ideological position against both absolute monarchy and authoritarian communism. The party remains committed to protecting constitutionalism, as evidenced by its actions to reinstate the House of Representatives. For social justice, the NC adopted democratic socialism in 1955/56 as its conceptual and structural foundation for Nepal's modern economy, aiming for equal opportunity. Early reforms under B.P. Koirala included the abolition of the Jamindari and Birta land systems and nationalisation of forests, laying the groundwork for economic development. Post-1990, NC governments introduced economic liberalisation alongside the foundation of a welfare state, emphasising decentralisation and social security programs to ensure development benefits reached marginalised communities.

The global development discourse has increasingly recognised the importance of gender equality, child rights, and inclusive development as central to achieving long-term social progress and justice. Women and children, historically marginalised in both political and economic spheres, are now placed at the heart of international agendas such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which advocate for the elimination of gender-based discrimination and the protection of children's rights (UNDP, 2020). These

goals emphasise access to education, healthcare, and political participation as essential elements of human development. Nationally, countries like Nepal have also aligned their development frameworks with these global priorities. The Constitution of Nepal (2015) conveys a decisive mandate for equality and rights of women, guarantees fundamental rights for women and children, and specific provisions for affirmative action. Nepal is also a signatory to several UN conventions on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women (CEDAW). Political parties have increasingly incorporated gender-sensitive and child-focused commitments into their policy documents. These shifts reflect a growing awareness that sustainable development cannot be achieved without ensuring the active inclusion and empowerment of women, as well as safeguarding the well-being of children (UNICEF, 2021). As such, the policy landscape is gradually evolving to reflect a more inclusive and rights-based approach to development. The Constitution of Nepal (2015) firmly upholds the rights of women and children as fundamental to the development of an inclusive and just society. It guarantees women's rights to equality, reproductive health, property, and participation in all state bodies based on the principle of proportional inclusion. Similarly, it ensures every child the right to identity, education, health care, protection, and development. The Constitution prohibits child labour, child marriage, and violence against women and children. By incorporating these rights into its legal framework, Nepal reaffirms its commitment to gender equality, child welfare, and the protection of vulnerable populations through legal and policy measures (The Constitution of Nepal, 2015).

The Nepali Congress is dedicated to eradicating all forms of discrimination and disparities based on caste, ethnicity, and wealth. The NC's commitment to inclusion embraces Nepal's diverse multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and multi-linguistic identity, viewing it as a core strength. They have actively worked to ensure the inclusion and well-being of all citizens, with a particular focus on women and children. Significant institutional frameworks, such as the National Women's Commission, Dalit Commission, and Indigenous Nationalities Institutions, were established under their leadership (Nepali Congress, 2022).

Since its inception, the Nepali Congress (NC) has upheld democracy, socialism, and inclusivity as its foundational principles. In recognition of gender equality as a cornerstone of democratic development, the party established the "Nepal Mahila Sangh" as its women's wing to promote the political and social empowerment of women, particularly during Nepal's early democratic movements. Historical milestones such as the appointment of Dwarika Devi Thakurani to Minister B.P. Koirala's cabinet reflect the NC's early commitment to women's representation in governance. However, as Nepal has transitioned into a federal democratic republic with a constitution that enshrines gender equality and child rights as core tenets of an inclusive state, questions emerge regarding the NC's current policy orientation. Specifically, it remains unclear whether the party has adapted its frameworks and strategies to align with these constitutional mandates and evolving democratic norms effectively. Persistent ambiguities exist concerning the clarity, scope, and practical implementation of the NC's commitments to the rights and welfare of women and children.

Despite broader academic attention to gender and child rights in Nepal, there is a notable lack of focused scholarly inquiry into how the NC articulates and operationalises these issues within its policy documents. Without a systematic analysis of NC's contemporary policy discourse, it is difficult to assess whether its stated principles translate into concrete actions. Therefore, this study seeks to critically examine the NC's current policy stance on gender and child welfare, evaluating its alignment with constitutional ideals, democratic values, and the principles of inclusive governance. The investigation aims to determine the extent to which the NC's policies reflect actionable commitments and resonate with both national obligations and international standards on gender and child inclusion.

This study contributes to the broader discourse on social justice and inclusive governance in democratic systems by critically examining the policy orientations of political parties, with a specific focus on the Nepali Congress (NC) Party. By analysing the NC's stated commitments toward women and children, the research interrogates the extent to which marginalised groups are substantively represented in party rhetoric, policy discourse, and agenda-setting processes. In particular, it explores how issues related to education, health, economic development, and social equity are framed within the party's political agenda.

The study holds both academic and policy significance. It offers a systematic evaluation of the NC Party's 2079 election manifesto and internal statutes, thereby addressing a notable gap in existing literature concerning political accountability and inclusive development. Furthermore, it provides a valuable reference for policymakers, civil society actors, and scholars interested in assessing the alignment between political commitments and the broader goals of equity and justice in Nepal's democratic landscape.

A limitation of this study is its reliance solely on secondary sources and specific party documents, without primary data collection to capture the lived experiences of women and children or the nuances of implementation. Future work should therefore involve substantive empirical research, including primary data, to assess the actual impact and effectiveness of these policies.

Review of literature

Feminist theory highlights the persistent structural inequalities that exist between genders and emphasises the need for equal rights, meaningful representation, and the empowerment of women in all areas of social, political, and economic life (Tong, 2009). It critically examines how systems and institutions often reinforce male dominance, calling for transformative change that extends beyond tokenistic inclusion.

In the context of the NC, the party has officially committed to ensuring 33% representation of women from the central level to the ward level, aligning with the broader feminist demand for gender inclusion in political institutions (Nepali Congress, 2022). However, from a feminist theoretical perspective, this numerical representation does not necessarily translate into real empowerment or influence. The party has not been able to ensure a similar level of representation for women in its top leadership positions, indicating a focus on symbolic inclusion rather than substantive empowerment. The presence of women in the

party's structural framework appears more as a compliance with constitutional obligations than a genuine effort to redistribute power.

While the party's approach appears progressive on the surface, it lacks the transformative depth required to challenge the deeply embedded patriarchal norms that continue to influence political culture and leadership selection within the party. Thus, from a feminist lens, the NC's policy can be seen as progressive in form but insufficient in content, failing to deliver the structural change necessary for true gender equality.

Institutionalism, particularly the strand of New Institutionalism, emphasises the significance of institutions, defined not only as formal rules and structures but also as informal norms, routines, and shared understandings in shaping political behaviour and policy outcomes (Hall & Taylor, 1996). New Institutionalism moves beyond the idea of institutions as neutral frameworks. Instead, it emphasises how embedded power relations, historical paths, and cultural expectations within institutions influence actions and spread certain behaviours over time.

The NC's formal rules and public commitments, such as ensuring 33% representation of women in all structures from the centre to the grassroots level, reflect an attempt to institutionalise gender inclusion (Nepali Congress, 2022). These rules align with constitutional mandates and reflect a formal commitment to democratic inclusivity. However, New Institutionalism helps uncover the disconnect between formal rules and actual practice. While policies and quotas exist on paper, informal norms and elite-dominated networks continue to shape the internal decision-making processes of the party. The central committee and executive leadership remain overwhelmingly male-dominated, and women are often confined to lower-tier or symbolic positions with limited influence over party agendas or policy formulation.

Although the formal structure appears inclusive, the informal operation of power marked by patronage, hierarchy, and male dominance continues to obstruct meaningful institutional transformation. This analysis underscores how surface-level reforms may not lead to substantive change unless deeper institutional practices and values are also addressed.

Intersectionality describes how various social categories (gender, caste, class, and ethnicity) compound to create different kinds of disadvantage. Although the NC champions women's representation, most women leaders so far are upper-caste, urban, and elite women. The participation of oppressed women, such as Dalits, Janajatis, Madhesis, and Muslim women, has still not been appropriately addressed by the party. Likewise, children in rural, indigenous, and economically challenged areas have been neglected in child policies (Crenshaw, 1991).

This theory emphasises the significance of a robust, proactive government in fostering national progress, particularly through strategic economic planning and inclusive social policies designed to enhance citizens' welfare (Leftwich, 1995). This framework emphasises that government-led initiatives, rather than solely market-driven approaches,

are essential for addressing structural inequalities and promoting long-term social change. It also emphasises that government policies should not only focus on economic growth but also prioritise broad-based welfare, particularly for marginalised groups such as women and children.

The NC, as one of Nepal's oldest and most influential political parties, demonstrates alignment with the developmental state perspective by incorporating women and child welfare into its broader national development agenda. In its 2022 manifesto, the party outlines commitments such as free healthcare for children below the age of three and senior citizens above 73, stronger anti-trafficking measures, and programs to combat child labour and abuse (Nepali Congress, 2022). These initiatives reflect an understanding of welfare not as isolated charity but as an integrated component of national progress, which is consistent with the core ideas of the developmental state model.

While the NC's intentions appear to support inclusive development, the coordination of policies and allocation of resources for the welfare of women and children remains fragmented and inconsistent. The absence of robust institutional mechanisms to implement and monitor these welfare commitments weakens their developmental potential. Moreover, many of these policies appear to be driven more by electoral incentives than by a long-term vision for sustainable development. Thus, despite the presence of developmental rhetoric, the NC's approach risks falling short of establishing the institutional depth and policy coherence characteristic of an actual developmental state.

Hachhethu (2025) mentioned that Nepal's political parties present a complex paradox, having played crucial roles in establishing and restoring democracy, yet also contributing to its undermined legitimacy and credibility. These parties have undergone significant transformation into electoral organisations, primarily focused on securing power, and have shifted away from ideological principles, resulting in a growing gap between themselves and the electorate. Key challenges identified include centralisation, insufficient internal democratic processes, and the formation of factions centred on personalities rather than ideological differences. Despite constitutional provisions designed to foster inclusion and periodic elections for party officials, the author notes that specific provisions have been manipulated, leading to a lack of intra-party democracy. He ultimately asserts that for Nepal to move towards a more robust democratic future, significant reforms are necessary, including implementing term limits for party officials, shifting candidate selection to a bottom-up model, and preventing the politicisation of professional organisations.

Research Methods

Given the limited academic focus on how the NC frames its policies toward women and children, this study seeks to examine these dimensions within the party's official documents critically. As the oldest and one of the largest mainstream political parties in Nepal, the NC plays a significant role in shaping national policy discourse. However, its specific commitments to marginalised groups, particularly women and children, have not been thoroughly analysed. This research employs a qualitative approach, relying solely

on secondary sources, including scholarly literature, policy documents, party manifestos, and relevant theoretical frameworks, without engaging with primary data. The analysis is grounded in liberal democratic principles, especially the concepts of democracy and inclusion, which provide the theoretical lens for understanding the party's ideological and policy orientation. The study thus aims to contribute to both academic literature and policy debates by highlighting how the NC addresses, or overlooks, the needs of women and children in its political agenda.

Results

The NC, a party with deep roots in democratic socialism, has long prioritised inclusive development and social justice. The NC's approach to policies affecting women and children is closely linked to its broader goal of creating an inclusive, egalitarian, and prosperous Nepal. The party aims to establish a just, fair, progressive, and peaceful democratic society that safeguards the political, economic, social, linguistic, cultural, and religious rights, as well as individual freedoms, security, protection, and equal opportunities for all citizens. It promises to eliminate all forms of gender discrimination and to take swift legal action against any party members involved in violence or discrimination against women. The NC is dedicated to building an egalitarian society free from superstition, orthodoxy, untouchability, and discrimination, actively combating inhumane treatment and violence against Dalits and women. Its 2079 election manifesto continues this ideological focus, highlighting the empowerment and well-being of women and children. The party's commitments align with the constitutional guarantees of equality, dignity, and non-discrimination outlined in the Constitution of Nepal, 2015 (The Nepali Congress Status (Bidhan), 2017; Nepali Congress, 2022). According to the NC's statute and party manifesto, policies related to women and children have been analysed as follows:

A key tenet of the NC's approach to development is social justice, particularly the eradication of caste, gender, and class-based disparities. The NC is committed to implementing new constitutional provisions that ensure the representation and access of women and other marginalised groups, such as Dalits, indigenous nationalities, Madhesi, Tharu, Muslims, backwards classes, minority communities, and people from remote areas. Building upon its legacy, which includes the abolition of exploitative labour systems such as Kamaiya and Haliya, the 2079 election manifesto is likely to reaffirm commitments to dismantle deeply rooted discriminatory practices and promote inclusive participation (Shrestha, 2022). The party's gender policies appear rooted in constitutional mandates to eliminate gender-based violence. Further, the manifesto likely advocates reforms to ensure equitable citizenship and guardianship rights for women, challenging patriarchal structures that restrict legal recognition through matrilineal lineage. It aims to establish proportional and inclusive representation at all levels within Nepal's constitutional, legal, and state structures. Historically, the NC's leadership initiated the establishment of the National Women's Commission to address inclusion (Nepali Congress, 2022).

In alignment with Nepal's broader national objective of inclusive human capital development, the NC underscores its commitment to ensuring equitable access to education and healthcare. The Nepali Congress (NC) has adopted a comprehensive, rights-based approach to child welfare, placing children at the centre of its political agenda through

policies that emphasise protection, development, inclusion, and equity. Recognising children as a vulnerable demographic, the party seeks not only to safeguard their rights but to ensure their holistic development across sectors such as education, health, recreation, and social protection. These commitments are reflected in both the party's internal structures and its broader policy priorities, reinforcing the notion of children as entitled rights-holders rather than passive recipients of aid (Nepali Congress Status [Bidhan], 2017).

Central to this agenda is the provision of free basic and secondary education for all citizens, with a particular focus on quality and inclusivity. The party's manifesto appears to prioritise universal access to education, especially for girls, through supportive measures such as scholarships, residential facilities, and targeted enrolment campaigns for historically marginalised groups. Gender-sensitive education policies, including leadership development programs for adolescent girls, are likely embedded in this framework. To address persistent inequalities in education, the party pledges free technical education for marginalised communities, the Kamari, Kamiya, and Chepang. It also proposes residential schooling and secondary-level education for vulnerable groups, including the Halia, freed Kamaiya, orphaned, and destitute children. Dalit and impoverished students are to be supported through special scholarships and educational assistance. Furthermore, the promotion of digital learning is prioritised to equip 50% of schools with internet access within the next five years.

Parallel to educational reforms, the health component of the manifesto emphasises the development of a people-centred, integrated national healthcare system. This system seeks to ensure universal access to quality care, particularly for underserved populations. The party commits to providing free treatment for children under the age of three and senior citizens above the age of 73 (Nepali Congress, 2022). Within five years, it aims to establish universal health insurance coverage, with guaranteed treatment for serious illnesses through insurance schemes. Specific attention is given to vulnerable groups, such as single women and marginalised female populations, who will be offered free health insurance. The NC has introduced various programs related to women's health, including the 'Pregnancy to Death' program to reduce the mortality rate of women during pregnancy (Shrestha, 2022).

Recognising the structural disparities in healthcare access, the NC proposes the establishment of basic health centres in 2,600 wards currently without such facilities and the construction of primary hospitals staffed with specialist doctors in all municipalities. Furthermore, plans are in place to develop health science institutions and specialised hospitals, including pediatric and maternity facilities across all seven provinces.

Public health goals include reducing the maternal mortality rate to 80 per 100,000 live births and reducing child malnutrition (stunting) to 20%. The party further proposes the distribution of free, high-quality sanitary pads for all girls and women and the implementation of food-based nutrition programs for children, pregnant women, and lactating mothers. Initiatives such as the "Golden Thousand Days" program aim to combat early childhood stunting, while free prenatal examinations, counselling, and nutritional support for pregnant women are also promised.

Additional maternal health commitments include free institutional delivery services, home-based maternal and neonatal healthcare, a “five-thousand delivery allowance,” and the provision of “nutrition coupons” for mothers and children during the first 1,000 days. These measures collectively aim to support Nepal’s commitment to reducing maternal and infant mortality while enhancing reproductive health services for women, particularly in remote and underserved areas (Ministry of Health and Population [MoHP], 2022; Nepali Congress, 2022).

To ensure sustainability and accountability, the NC pledges to allocate at least 10% of its annual budget to the health and nutrition sectors at all levels of government. This comprehensive approach integrates both structural reform and social protection, aligning with the broader goals of inclusive development and social justice.

The NC also acknowledges the critical role of play and recreation in child development. Through its Sports Department, the party promotes children’s right to play and supports the creation of inclusive, child-friendly infrastructure. Recreational activities are integrated into early childhood and school-level education as part of a holistic approach to well-being.

To combat child labour, the NC leverages the efforts of its Trade Union Department to eliminate exploitative practices, linking child labour to broader social justice concerns and targeting structural poverty as a root cause. The party envisions a society where children are protected from exploitation and provided with the opportunity to grow in a nurturing and safe environment.

This multifaceted policy orientation aligns with national priorities outlined in Nepal’s Sixteenth Plan and global frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals. The NC reinforces its commitment to social equity by proposing the allocation of at least 10% of the national and sub-national annual budgets to health and nutrition. Through these integrated strategies, the NC aims to institutionalise child welfare as a cornerstone of Nepal’s inclusive development agenda, advancing both immediate protection and long-term human capital development (The Nepali Congress Status (Bidhan), 2017).

The NC emphasises economic empowerment for women through skills training, entrepreneurship programs, and microcredit support, particularly for female-headed households. These initiatives aim to promote self-reliance and contribute to reducing poverty nationwide. The party also supports social security programs that assist single women, children, and vulnerable families, in line with Nepal’s constitutional and international commitments to protect at-risk populations.

The NC promotes an integrated approach to social security based on the concept of “From Cradle to Grave,” which ensures dignity and state responsibility for citizens throughout their lives. As part of this framework, it proposes self-employment assistance with a 50 per cent government subsidy for single women and persons with disabilities.

To address unemployment and support economic growth, the party plans to create at least 250,000 new jobs annually, with a focus on sectors that have high employment potential. It

also aims to provide youth with skill development grants or access to full-time education, preparing them for dignified work. For indigent individuals, the party proposes to guarantee a minimum of 100 days of employment each year (The Nepali Congress Election Manifesto, 2022).

The party has initiated targeted programs at the local level aimed at empowering women, fostering their leadership capacities, and enhancing their economic independence. These initiatives are designed to promote skill development, encourage entrepreneurship, and support women in achieving greater socio-economic self-reliance. The overarching objective is to create an enabling environment that enables women to actively participate in decision-making processes and contribute meaningfully to local development (Nepali Congress, 2024).

The Nepali Congress (NC) has institutionalised a commitment to gender inclusion through a combination of constitutional mandates, party statutes, and dedicated policy frameworks. Anchored in the *Nepali Congress Bidhan* (2017), the party has adopted structural mechanisms to ensure the representation and empowerment of women at all levels of its organisation. At the local level, Village and Municipality Ward Committees are required to include at least three women among nine directly elected members. At the same time, Urban, Sub-Metropolitan, and Metropolitan Ward Committees must have one-third female representation. These quotas extend to other historically marginalised groups, including Dalits, indigenous nationalities, Khas Arya, Madhesis, Tharus, Muslims, and residents of backwards regions, reflecting a broader vision of inclusive governance.

Across the party's executive structures—village, urban, provincial, district, and central—specific quotas are maintained to secure women's representation. For example, the District Executive Committee must include at least one-third women. At the same time, the Provincial Executive Committee requires the inclusion of both a woman and a man from each inclusive category. At the central level, key leadership roles, such as the Assistant General Secretary, are reserved for women, and the chairperson holds the authority to nominate additional members, one-third of whom must be women.

The NC also ensures women's participation in its highest decision-making bodies—the Central General Convention and Maha Samiti—through both electoral and nomination processes. Furthermore, the party operates a dedicated Women's Department that oversees the Nepal Women's Association (Nepal Mahila Sangh), responsible for policy development, empowerment programs, and coordination with governmental and non-governmental organisations on women's issues at national and international levels (The Nepali Congress Status (Bidhan), 2017).

Despite formally ensuring 33% women's representation from the central to local levels by the Constitution, the NC acknowledges that this threshold has not yet been effectively met in leadership roles. The 2022 manifesto seeks to address this shortfall by emphasising women's advancement in executive roles within both political and public service institutions. However, meaningful inclusion remains constrained by entrenched structural and cultural

barriers. The party recognises the need for statutory amendments to secure a minimum of 33% representation of women in leadership positions across all tiers, thereby transforming symbolic representation into substantive political empowerment.

5. Protection from Exploitation and Abuse

Given Nepal's vulnerability to trafficking and child labour, the *NC Policy and Program and the Election Manifesto of 2022*, the party expresses a strong commitment to protecting vulnerable populations, particularly women and children, from various forms of exploitation and abuse. Recognising Nepal's heightened vulnerability to human trafficking, child labour, and other exploitative practices, especially in border and conflict-affected regions, the NC manifesto emphasises the need for robust enforcement mechanisms and systemic reforms. The manifesto outlines initiatives aimed at strengthening legal frameworks and institutional responses to trafficking and child exploitation. It proposes targeted programs for the rehabilitation and reintegration of trafficking survivors, including psychosocial support and vocational training, public awareness campaigns, and capacity-building of law enforcement and local institutions to ensure effective prevention and response. Furthermore, the NC pledges to conduct extensive awareness campaigns to educate at-risk communities about their rights and available protections.

The party advocates for enhancing the capacity of law enforcement agencies and local governments to identify, prevent, and respond effectively to such abuses. By addressing both preventive and curative aspects, the NC aims to create a safer and more just society, aligning with its broader agenda of inclusive democracy, social justice, and human rights protection (*The Nepali Congress, 2022*).

Discussion

The Nepali Congress (NC) adopts a rights-based, inclusive approach to women and child welfare, policies and initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality and empowering women across social, political, and economic spheres. These party-specific commitments align with and are further elaborated by the broader national strategic development outlined in Nepal's Sixteenth Plan (Sohraun Yojana), spanning Fiscal Year 2081/82 to 2085/86. The national plan underscores a commitment to achieving good governance, social justice, and prosperity, serving as the foundational framework for policies concerning women and children (NPC, 2024). Similarly, Nepal's 2015 Constitution is regarded as one of the most progressive in South Asia concerning women's rights, guaranteeing gender equality and prohibiting gender-based discrimination. It establishes legal provisions for equal pay, property rights, access to education, protection from domestic violence, and mandates minimum quotas for women's political representation (Acharya, 2025).

The Nepali Congress's policy framework is committed to the welfare and empowerment of women and children. This commitment is consistent with its democratic socialist ideology and constitutional mandates. Nepal's Constitution emphasises the creation of an equitable and prosperous society based on proportional, inclusive, and participatory principles to ensure social justice and equality for all, including women and children. Policy and legal provisions have been enacted to operationalise these constitutional rights. Key national

and international frameworks include: The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW, 1979), the Beijing Platform for Action (1995) for women's rights and gender equality, and the National Gender Equality Policy, 2077 (2020/21). Legislation such as the Children's Act, 2075, and the Human Trafficking and Transportation (Control) Act, 2064 (NPC, 2024).

NC is dedicated to eradicating all forms of discrimination and disparities based on caste, ethnicity, and wealth, particularly against women and children. Under its leadership, significant institutional frameworks such as the National Women's Commission, Dalit Commission, and Indigenous Nationalities Institutions were established. The national goal, as articulated in the Sixteenth Plan, is to eliminate all forms of discrimination, exclusion, and deprivation, fostering a society where every individual and community, especially women, Dalits, Indigenous Nationalities, Madheshis, Tharus, Muslims, oppressed and backward classes, minorities, LGBTQIA+ individuals, farmers, laborers, children, people with disabilities, and the elderly, can fully utilize their capabilities and potential. Special priority is given to their protection, empowerment, and holistic development (NPC, 2024).

The NC is committed to social justice, particularly the eradication of caste, gender, and class-based disparities. Its gender policies are rooted in constitutional mandates. Similarly, social justice is a core objective of the Sixteenth Plan, aiming for tangible positive changes in the lives of ordinary citizens by ensuring justice in access to health, education, employment, housing, security, and public service delivery (NPC, 2024). Efforts focus on eliminating harmful practices such as child marriage, polygamy, and Chhaupadi; combating gender-based violence with justice access and support services; and recognising women's unpaid care work in national accounting (NPC, 2024).

The Nepali Congress emphasises equitable access to education and healthcare as part of inclusive human capital development. It pledges universal free education and health insurance, with targeted support for children under three and the elderly. Similarly, Key health priorities include reducing maternal and child mortality, expanding health insurance coverage from 21% to 70% by 2085/86, and increasing access to nearby health facilities. Programs focus on maternal health, cancer screening for women, and integrating social security schemes. The plan also targets drug self-sufficiency and upgrades to child health infrastructure, including a national pediatric institute (NPC, 2024).

The Nepali Congress (NC) advocates for universal, free, and inclusive access to basic and secondary education, with a particular emphasis on addressing historical inequalities faced by girls and marginalised communities. Through targeted interventions—such as scholarships, residential facilities, and outreach programs—the party seeks to dismantle systemic barriers to education and foster equitable participation. In alignment with national policy objectives, the Government of Nepal reported a literacy rate of 76.3% by fiscal year 2079/80, with female literacy at 69.4%, and has set ambitious goals of achieving 95% literacy and full basic education completion by 2085/86 (NPC, 2024).

In economic and social policy, the NC promotes job creation, social protection, and women's economic participation. Government goals include reducing poverty to 12%, expanding social security to 60%, and lowering unemployment to 5% by 2085/86. Initiatives target

vulnerable groups through subsidised self-employment, care work recognition, and entrepreneurship support, particularly for youth and women (NPC, 2024).

The Nepali Congress affirms its commitment to safeguarding vulnerable groups, particularly women and children, from exploitation and abuse. Its policies emphasise survivor rehabilitation, psychosocial and vocational support, public awareness campaigns, and capacity-building of law enforcement and local institutions to ensure effective prevention and response. The Sixteenth Plan strengthens efforts to combat human trafficking, exploitation, and violence through legal, institutional, and preventive measures. It emphasises adherence to international conventions like the Palermo Protocol and aims to expand rehabilitation centres for trafficking victims to 15 districts by 2085/86. Campaigns target harmful practices such as child marriage and dowry, while child protection efforts focus on implementing the Children's Act, 2075, and addressing child labour. The plan also highlights the growing need to regulate cybercrime and illicit online activities, calling for updated IT legislation (NPC, 2024).

The Nepali Congress upholds gender quotas and constitutional mandates to promote women's political participation, aiming for substantive representation across all levels. While 33% representation is constitutionally guaranteed, the party acknowledges underrepresentation in leadership roles and proposes statutory reforms to address this. As of FY 2079/80, women held 33.6% of seats in the Federal Parliament, 34.5% in Provincial Assemblies, and 40.9% at local levels, with targets of 40–45% by 2085/86. Women's presence in the judiciary remains low (3.0%), and their participation in policy-making roles is targeted to rise from 13.7% to 20% (NPC, 2024).

Despite formal commitments to gender inclusion, a significant gap remains between policy and practice within the Nepali Congress. Internal decision-making is still shaped by informal, elite-dominated networks, with women underrepresented mainly in leadership roles and often limited to symbolic positions. Representation is skewed toward upper-caste, urban elites, while marginalised women—Dalits, Janajatis, Madhesis, and Muslims—remain largely excluded. Due to a patriarchal mindset and male-dominated political culture in Nepal, despite this significant representation of women in politics, high-level policy-making positions remain predominantly occupied by men (Prasain, 2025). Experts and political leaders express that legal advancements have not translated into practical implementation. Societal norms, cultural barriers, economic stagnation, and weak institutional enforcement continue to limit women's full participation in leadership and decision-making roles. Sustained progress requires not only legal reforms but also economic opportunities, awareness campaigns, and supportive structures that enable women to lead and thrive across all sectors (Aker, 2025). Moreover, the weak enforcement of gender-sensitive laws and limited investment in implementation mechanisms continue to expose women to systemic vulnerabilities. Traditional patriarchal norms, especially in rural and specific ethnic communities, further undermine legal safeguards, including those related to inheritance and workplace protections. Women continue to face discrimination in accessing non-traditional employment sectors, with punitive treatment during pregnancy and persistent income disparities—a 30% gender wage gap remains, rendering female-headed

households particularly vulnerable to poverty. Women are disproportionately engaged in vulnerable and informal employment, often burdened by unpaid domestic responsibilities (Danish Trade Union Development Agency, 2022). Nepal still has substantial progress to make in achieving gender equality and overcoming all forms of gender discrimination, prejudice, and harmful stereotypes (Bhusal, 2024).

The Nepali Congress adopts a rights-based and inclusive approach to child welfare, focusing on education, health, protection, and recreation, with targeted support for marginalised groups. Its commitments include free healthcare for children under three and measures to combat child labour and abuse. The Sixteenth Plan reinforces this through goals such as universal birth registration, expanded early childhood development, reduced child mortality, and child-friendly infrastructure. It also emphasises integrating sports and ensuring equitable access to services to support holistic child development (NPC, 2024).

Despite legal and policy advancements, the situation of children in Nepal continues to be critically challenged by deep-seated systemic issues within both the education and labour force sectors. For children, while Nepal has ratified international conventions and enacted laws such as the Act Relating to Children of 2018, setting a minimum work age of 15, the definition of hazardous work remains inconsistent with international standards, notably failing to prohibit brickmaking despite evidence of children carrying heavy loads and being exposed to hazardous substances. Child labour remains widespread, intrinsically linked to poverty, and was tragically pushed to “unprecedented levels” by the economic downturn following the Covid-19 pandemic, leading to a drastic increase in children living in poverty from an estimated 1.3 million to seven million by August 2020. This pervasive issue is more prevalent in the informal economy, accounting for around 78% of child labour, and disproportionately affects children whose parents have lower educational attainment or work informally. Paradoxically, children enrolled in primary education exhibit the highest percentage of child labour at 30%, a figure that drops significantly for those in secondary education (Danish Trade Union Development Agency, 2022).

The persistent gap between policy formulation and implementation within the Nepali Congress Party and the broader state apparatus can be attributed to structural and socio-cultural factors, weak governance mechanisms, inadequate resource allocation, and a lack of sustained political will. These institutional shortcomings are further compounded by deeply entrenched patriarchal norms and socio-cultural values that continue to shape public attitudes and policy priorities. Similarly, under the current electoral system, no single political party has secured a majority, requiring the formation of coalition governments. This arrangement often creates significant challenges for effectively implementing party-specific policies and programs, as consensus among diverse political actors becomes necessary, thus limiting decisive and coherent governance.

Conclusion

Women and children constitute the foundational pillars of society. In a democratic society, the formulation and implementation of equitable policies and programs that

address the comprehensive welfare of women and children, particularly in the areas of health, education, and economic empowerment, are essential for promoting inclusive and sustainable development. Political parties are essential parts of democratic societies. They play a crucial role in establishing democracy by representing the people, encouraging participation, developing policies, and ensuring that leaders are held accountable. The Nepali Congress is a historical democratic force in Nepal, having played a pivotal role in establishing democracy and advocating for people's rights. The NC, grounded in democratic socialist ideals, articulates a policy framework that prioritises the inclusion, empowerment, and protection of women and children as integral to its broader vision of social justice and inclusive governance. Through its election manifestos, institutional statutes, and programmatic commitments, the NC seeks to align its political, economic, educational, and legal strategies with constitutional and international standards to address systemic inequalities and promote the welfare of these historically marginalised groups.

However, embedded systematic inequalities, socio-cultural norms, deep-rooted patriarchy, institutional limitations, male-dominated political culture, weak enforcement, insufficient resource allocation, and challenges posed by coalition governments and poor governance impede effective execution, failing to uphold its stated commitments, with many of its policy positions reduced to nominal declarations. The party has increasingly prioritised personal interests, fostered corruption, and engaged in patronage-driven politics, undermining its credibility and weakening public trust in democratic governance. This implies that despite formal rules, informal norms continue to obstruct meaningful institutional transformation, often reducing policies to electoral incentives rather than long-term developmental visions.

As a political party grounded in democratic principles, it must bear a fundamental responsibility to respond to the nation's evolving socio-political realities, guide the country toward sustainable development, and foster an inclusive and prosperous society. To uphold its policy commitments and core principles, it must transcend rhetorical declarations by ensuring effective implementation, confronting entrenched social norms, reinforcing enforcement mechanisms, and allocating sufficient resources to realise equitable and inclusive development. Ensuring 33% representation of women at all levels of party and state leadership is essential. Equitable access to health, education, and employment must be guaranteed, with no poor child or woman, pregnant woman, or Nepali citizen dying due to lack of treatment. Nepali Congress leaders must prioritise collective commitments over personal interests.

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