

# Promoting Social Inclusion by Gender and Disability: Insights from Rupani Rural Municipality, Saptari, Madhesh Province

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper analyses policies and practices related to Gender, Equality, Disability, and Social Inclusion (GEDSI) in Nepal's federal governance systems. Social inclusion in Nepal, enshrined in the Constitution and subsequent policy provisions, has progressively evolved as a key development strategy, particularly emphasising gender and disability rights through affirmative actions and sectoral integration. This paper draws on review of policies and a descriptive research design. Secondary data were collected from the review of literature and. Lack of data with adequate disaggregation, on intersectionality, and limited capacity at the local level hinder evidence-based planning and inclusive budgeting. Additionally, issues like child marriage, restricted decision-making roles for women, and inadequate male engagement further challenge women's empowerment. This paper concludes that GEDSI has been reflected in policies, programmes, and budgets; however, there remains a lack of clear mechanisms to identify interventions and reach the most excluded within the marginalised groups. The paper highlights the urgent need for disaggregated data systems, mandatory GEDSI-responsive budgeting and monitoring tools, sector-specific guidelines, and provision of accessible infrastructure.*

## 1. Introduction

Social inclusion is a political terminology promoted through the 'third way' agenda of Tony Blair (1997–2007) to represent centrist approaches that blend the market-driven and social welfare and seek a balanced partnership between the state, market, and civil society to achieve inclusive and sustainable

development (Jones, 2010). In the context of Nepal, since the 11<sup>th</sup> Plan (2007/08–2009/10), the concept of social inclusion has been intensively subscribed across the sectors—as a strategy to reach women, persons with disabilities, and remote and underdeveloped regions (National Planning Commission [NPC], 2008). Grounded on the Interim Constitution of Nepal, 2007,

the 11<sup>th</sup> plan provisioned numerous social inclusion initiatives and followed through the principles of social inclusion across the sectors and aimed to uplift and mainstream the persons who are historically at the bottom and deprived of access to an opportunity to enjoy the constitutionally granted rights (Interim Constitution of Nepal, 2007). Moreover, the space for social inclusion is remarkably articulated in the Federal Constitution of Nepal as well through the affirmative actions to women, persons with disabilities, *Dalits*, indigenous people, indigenous nationalities, *Khas Aryas*, *Madhesis*, *Tharus*, *Pichhada* class, and backward region citizens (Constitution of Nepal, 2015).

Gender refers to the socially mediated behavioral, cultural, and psychological attributes that are commonly associated with biological sex. According to gender essentialism, there are only two genders—male and female—and both sexes have fixed, innate physical and psychological characteristics. Gender essentialists maintain that basic characteristics are biologically determined, even though they admit that cultural norms have an impact on gender roles. Because of genetic differences, they can also consider intersex people to be rare outliers. Gender constructionism, on the other hand, contends that gender is a socially constructed term influenced by cultural and socio-economic factors, challenging the idea that gender features are biologically fixed. Although constructionism seeks to address prejudice based on gender, it also poses difficult issues about classification and identity (Johnson, 2021). Gender is a social construction based on biological sex, while disability is also a socially constructed phenomenon resulting from physical, mental, and emotional impairment (Shakespeare, 2013). Since both gender and disability are shaped by societal norms and structures that create barriers to participation, it is essential

for society to actively respond.

In this context, social inclusion serves as a vital tool to promote equitable representation and participation of individuals across gender and disability lines, ultimately fostering a more inclusive society. However, persons with disability have faced structural barriers and bitter experiences in public spaces while fulfilling requirements for cash access and money making, and faced challenges related to denial and discrimination, both in public spaces and personal interactions (Bhujel, 2022). Gender and disability are often treated separately in policy and academic discourse, yet both are socially constructed categories that deeply influence inclusion and participation in society. In the federal context of Nepal, the roles of the three tiers of government—federal, provincial, and local—are key in policy formulation and enforcement (Constitution of Nepal, 2015). The post-2015 institutional landscape, involving federal, provincial, and local governments, highlights the role of local authorities in the operationalisation of social security measures. This decentralised governance structure aligns with Foucault's governmentality, wherein power is distributed across various levels and actors, enhancing policy responsiveness and effectiveness. However, challenges in policy formulation and implementation, particularly for persons with disability (PwD), reveal gaps in governance that need addressing to ensure comprehensive social protection (Bhujel, 2024). It is not only limited to social protection but also in the larger domain of service delivery. Moreover, such gaps persist across the different marginalised groups.

## 2. Methods and Materials

This study is largely based on secondary sources while certain data was drawn from primary sources. To investigate current GEDSI (Gender Equality, Disability, and

Social Inclusion) frameworks, policies, and implementation strategies at the national and sub-national levels, a thorough desk review was conducted. Government policy documents, strategic plans, guidelines, legal documents, budget frameworks, and monitoring and evaluation reports pertinent to GEDSI were among the sources examined. Critical analysis was done on important documents like the Disability Inclusion Guidelines, the Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Strategy, and the annual progress reports, especially from the Rupani Rural Municipality, Saptari district, Madhesh Province. Moreover, such tools, published at the federal level, were referenced. In addition, a narrative inquiry was also conducted with municipal official.

### 3. Results and Discussion

#### 3.1 Policy context and institutional framework

The Constitution of Nepal, 2015 doesn't speak explicitly about GEDSI; however, many more provisions are enshrined through different types of fundamental rights to protect women, *dalits*, children, persons with disabilities, and vulnerable populations. The constitutional provisions of Nepal provide a sound basis for ensuring the rights of marginalised groups, including women, *dalits*, disabled individuals, and children. Women are ensured equal rights in the case of lineage and property, and are also ensured protection from all forms of violence and discrimination, and are provided preferential access to education, health, and employment opportunities through policies of positive discrimination. The Constitution explicitly prevents child marriage and all forms of exploitation and abuse of children, thereby safeguarding their rights to health, education, and secure development. *Dalits* have the right of proportional representation

in government institutions, free education, and assistance for their traditional ways of earning a living, which is meant to compensate for the centuries-old injustices done to them. Likewise, PwDs are also acknowledged as equal citizens of society who have the right to dignity, integration, and accessible state services (Constitution of Nepal, 2015). Collectively, these legislations aim to address deep-seated disparities and promote inclusive development in which all people, irrespective of caste, gender, disability, or poverty level.

As guided by the Constitution, the different sectoral authorities have enforced social inclusion policy to address and disparity based on gender and disability. However, the Ministry of Women Children and Senior Citizens (MoWCSC) is the key ministry for GEDSI related actions and while the focal ministry for local government is served by the Ministry of Federal Affairs and General Administration (MoFAGA); these two ministries are crucial for the issues GEDSI and its operationalisation (Government of Nepal Business Allocation Rule, 2017). Not limited to these ministries, other ministries and government authorities equally play an important role in enforcing GEDSI through a strategy and action plan. Translating constitutional provisions into action, a National Gender Equality Policy has been endorsed to ensure gender equality, empower women and sexual/gender minorities, and guarantee their fair participation in social, economic, political, and legal processes. The policy has also highlighted that all tiers of government—federal, provincial, and local—are responsible for implementing this policy (National Gender Equality Policy, 2020).

The Local Government Act of Nepal, promulgated in 2017, has provisioned the gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) to be incorporated through local level planning process— to get equal opportunities

and benefits in development, planning, and services. The aim of incorporating GESI as a scope of local government is to ensure the inclusion to the excluded or disadvantaged groups (based on caste, ethnicity, disability, location, poverty, etc.) are not left out. They should be included in decision-making, development programmes, and access to resources and services. In addition, the role of local government is to make services accessible for persons with disabilities by ensuring physical accessibility and other social protection measures (Local Government Operation Act, 2017).

The MoFAGA has endorsed Local Government Institutional Capacity Self-Assessment (LISA) guideline to track the performance of local governments in Nepal. Out of 10 major areas, GESI is one of them. These indicators evaluate efforts to ensure inclusive participation, equitable service delivery, and targeted programmes

for marginalised groups. Local governments are expected to integrate GESI principles in planning, budgeting, and implementation processes. The results help identify gaps and guide actions to strengthen inclusion at the local level (Kandel, 2021; Ministry of Federal Affair and General Administration [MoFAGA], 2020).

### 3.2 Demographic characteristics of Rupani Rural Municipality

Proportion of women in the total population, women literacy rate, disability prevalence, the percentage of women-headed households, the percentage of single women, and widows are key and crucial characteristics to assess the status of women and persons with disability.

Figure 1 shows various characteristics of women and persons with disability of Rupani Rural Municipality. Women make up 50.7 per

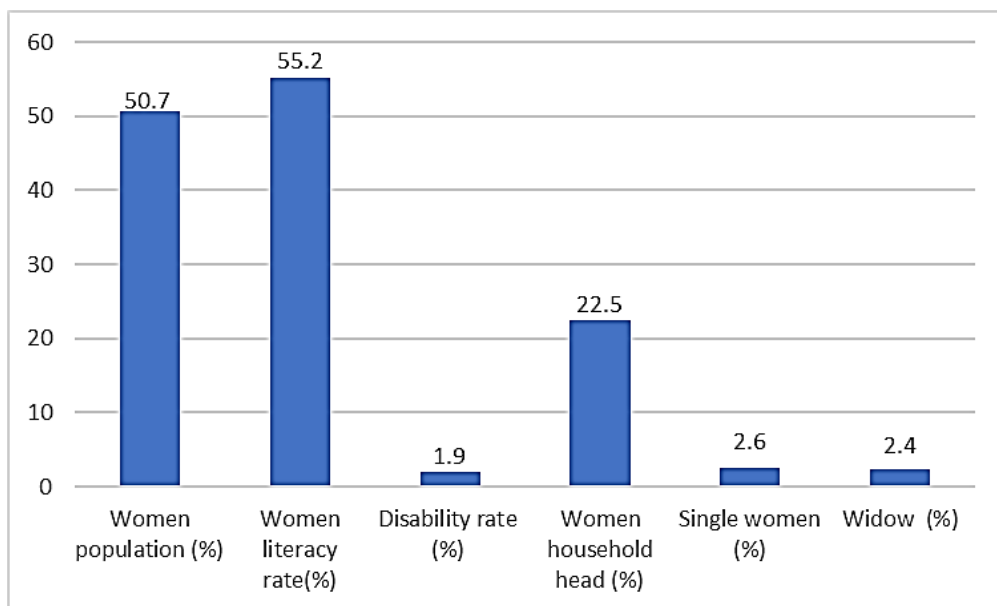


Figure 1: Demographic characteristics of Rupani Rural Municipality

Source: National Statistic Office, 2023

cent of the total population while women's literacy rate is at 55.2 per cent, and the disability rate among women is 1.9 per cent. A total of 22.5 per cent of households are headed by women. Additionally, 2.6 per cent of women are identified as single women, and 2.4 per cent are widows.

Out of the total prevalence of disability, physical disability accounts to the highest proportion at 46.9 per cent, followed by low vision at 12.3 per cent. Other notable categories include multiple disabilities (7%), deafness (6.1%), psycho-social disability (5.7%), and blindness and hard of hearing (each at 5.5%). Smaller proportions are seen in categories such as speech impairment (4.5%), intellectual disability (3.4%), hemophilia (1.2%), autism (0.4%), and deaf-blindness (1.6%).

### 3.3 Prevalence rate of child marriage

According to Nepal's law, marriage involving individuals under the age of 18 is legally recognised as child marriage. Accordingly, the prevalence of child marriage was calculated by determining the proportion of individuals aged 20 to 24 who were married before reaching the age of 18, which is commonly expressed as a percentage of the total population in that age group.

Table 1 shows the child marriage status of Rupani Rural Municipality, comparing

the data with Madhesh Province and Nepal. A look at child marriage data from national, provincial, and local levels shows a troubling and consistent pattern of gender inequality. At the national level, 14.1 per cent of people aged 20 to 24 get married before the age of 18. This was much more common among women (21.9%) than men (5.0%). This shows that girls are more likely to get married in young age than boys, which shows how deeply rooted gender inequality and social norms that favor early marriage for girls are. In Madhesh Province, the rate is even higher, with 19.9 per cent of people between the ages of 20 and 24 getting married as children. In this age group, 32.8 per cent of women get married before they turn 18, while only 5.7 per cent of men were married at that age. This shows that there is a big difference between men and women in this age category.

This suggests that child marriage remains deeply entrenched in the social fabric of Madhesh, driven by cultural practices, low levels of female education, and inadequate enforcement of existing laws. The scenario of Rupani Rural Municipality, mirrors this provincial trend. About 18.9 per cent of individuals aged 20–24 were married before 18, with 30.2 per cent of females affected compared to 5.5 per cent of males. Although Rupani's overall prevalence is slightly below the provincial average, the persistent gender gap underscores the urgent need for targeted interventions. These include community

**Table 1: Child marriage scenario in Nepal, Madhesh Province, and Rupani Rural Municipality**

Level	Marriage under 18 years			Reference age (20-24 years)			Child marriage (%)		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Nepal	62687	322334	385021	1259117	1472122	2731239	5.0	21.9	14.1
Madhesh Province	15375	97384	112759	268537	297253	565790	5.7	32.8	19.9
Rupani RM	20	17	532	1282	1532	2814	5.5	30.2	18.9

Source: National Statistic Office, 2023

education, enforcement of legal marriage age, and programmes that empower girls and promote their continued education. Overall, the data demonstrates that child marriage is not only a legal and social issue but also a deeply gendered one, requiring multi-level and intersectional approaches to achieve meaningful change.

### 3.4 Analysis of policy and budget from GESI perspective

An act relating to local government enshrined gender, disability, and social inclusion as a cross-cutting development agenda of the local government (Local Government Operation Act, 2017, p. 42). The annual policy and programme for the Fiscal Year 2024/25 of the Rupani Rural Municipality includes several targeted initiatives to promote GESI and support for persons with disabilities. The government plans to continue and expand programmes focused on economic and social empowerment of women, particularly those from marginalised backgrounds. This includes capacity-building, income-generating activities, and encouraging women's participation in local governance and decision-making. For persons with disabilities, the programme outlines special support to ensure access to essential services such as education, health, and employment. The annual policy of the municipality has made a commitment to distribute disability identity cards, expand social security benefits, and make public buildings and services more accessible through the best proximate solutions. Further, the annual policy highlighted the promotion of inclusive education by encouraging the participation of children with disabilities in regular schools (Shrestha Laugi, 2024).

To support the marginalised and vulnerable groups such as *dalits*, single women, indigenous communities, and senior citizens, the policy includes skill development,

entrepreneurship training, financial literacy, and expanded inclusion in social protection programmes. The policy for the Fiscal Year 2024/25 of the Rupani Rural Municipality also emphasises mainstreaming GESI at all levels of governance by mandating the integration of GESI-sensitive approaches in planning and budgeting processes. The policy has also provisioned GESI units or focal points within the municipality, and GESI audits and monitoring will be conducted. (Shrestha Laugi, 2024). Despite being explicitly articulated in the policy, while talking with the municipal official explained that:

The policy and programme of the municipality have incorporated GESI across the sectors, but the problem remains in formulating an annual work plan and budget due to more priority to infrastructure and less attention to such intangible activities (a municipal informant, narrative inquiry, 8 June 2025).

Shrestha Laugi (2024) also highlights under the education sector, scholarships and targeted educational support provided to girls, children from economically disadvantaged families, and children with disabilities. Gender-sensitive infrastructure—such as separate toilets and safe learning environments—is planned and developed in schools. Health and reproductive services are planned to improve, especially for rural and marginalised women, along with special health programmes for elderly women and persons with disabilities. Employment and livelihood initiatives include reserved quotas and preferential schemes for women, *dalits*, persons with disabilities, and other disadvantaged groups. In addition, the promotion of home-based and small enterprises will be prioritised to enhance economic participation among these communities.

According to the budget of Rupani Rural Municipality, Saptari, for the fiscal



year 2024/25, various programmes have been allocated targeting empowerment of women, persons with disabilities, *dalits*, *Haruwa–Charuwa*, and other marginalised groups. For women, the budget includes nutrition-related training and health monitoring programmes, as well as activities to assess the nutritional status of children under five through female community health volunteers. Programmes targeting Dalit and remote-area students include coaching and tuition classes, scholarships, and skill-building activities.

Similarly, specific initiatives have been allocated for the *Haruwa–Charuwa* and *dalit* communities, such as identity verification, distribution of ID cards, and tuition support. Persons with disabilities are also addressed through dedicated programmes to improve accessibility and inclusion. Under social protection and security, orientation programmes will be conducted for elected representatives and ward officials, along with awareness campaigns on civil registration (birth, death, marriage, etc.).

In addition, programmes are planned to take place through the Women Development Committee, focusing on institutional development and self-reliance of women. These awareness-raising initiatives aim to improve women's participation in social, economic, and political domains. Altogether, these programmes are expected to promote inclusive development and improve the quality of life for marginalised populations in the municipality.

### 3.5 Policy, budget, and operational mechanisms

Local governments of Nepal have the right to legislative exercise within their territory to formulate laws based on the exclusive and concurrent power mentioned in Schedules 8 and 9, without conflicting with federal and

provincial laws (Constitution of Nepal, 2015, p. 108). In case of Rupani Rural Municipality, there are more than twenty policies, including acts, directives, standards, and regulations in addition to drafting a GESI Strategy. However, the municipality documents by identifying and updating records of marginalised groups such as persons with disabilities, *dalits*, minorities, conflict-affected individuals, and single women. It has issued guidelines to deliver services based on national policies and has conducted skill-based training to support income generation for disadvantaged communities.

Gender Responsive Budget (GRB) is one of the emerging tools to hold governments accountable for their commitment to human rights and gender equality. Nepal has also adopted the practices of GRB at all three tiers of the government (Ministry of Finance [MoF], 2008). A study on GRB in Nepal highlights that the practice remains underdeveloped. Although budget allocations are made primarily at the ministerial level, the successful implementation of GRB depends on coordination across all levels of government. The research emphasises the need for stronger political commitment, improved governance, and a well-established monitoring system to make GRB more effective in advancing gender equality and protecting women's rights (Koirala, 2023). However, in regards to Rupani Rural Municipality, there are no explicit practices of gender budgeting, so it is difficult to trace the gender responsiveness aspect of municipality's budget.

## 4. Conclusion

As gender and disability are the social, cultural, and political understanding based on biological identity, it is the result and a byproduct of the society. With some initiatives, GEDSI has been reflected in policies, programmes, and budget both at the

federal and local levels. Local government has initiated various initiatives on GESI; however, there is no clear mechanism for identifying and reaching out to the most excluded within marginalised groups, which perpetuates the weak integration of GESI in budget allocation and decision-making processes. Moreover, the limited data on intersectionality (e.g., *dalit* women with disabilities) has also hindered evidence-based planning and budgeting of the local government. Hence, it is essential to develop a targeted beneficiary identification system at the local level using disaggregated data (by gender, caste, disability, and region), ensure mandatory GESI-responsive budgeting at all levels of planning, and build the capacity of local governments to understand intersectionality in exclusion.

Another important area of focus is on women's empowerment and the reduction of child marriage. The high prevalence rate of child marriage and few piecemeal interventions couldn't meet the requirement as enshrined in the policy. At the local level, the role of women is determined as beneficiaries, which exposes them as submissive, and they have lost the role of decision-making across the family and the local government at large. Moreover, the male engagement in gender equality efforts is very limited. Similarly, the accessibility in public infrastructure remains limited despite commitments; hence, the disability friendly facility is important in family and public spaces. Hence, it is important to develop and implement sector-specific GESI guidelines (education, health, infrastructure, etc.). For effective translation of policy into practice, local governments need to establish a GESI monitoring dashboard linked with existing local government systems.

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