

Women Empowerment Initiatives: A Case Study of Suryodaya Municipality

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Abstract

This case study will be about the impact and effectiveness of women's empowerment initiatives implemented by the local government in Suryodaya Municipality, Ilam, Nepal. By triangulating demographic census data, the municipality's First Five-Year Periodic Plan, the Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) Audit Report, and quarterly Pro-active Disclosure reports from several fiscal years, this research evaluates the efficacy of local policies against localized Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The findings contrast strong policy formulation with weaker institutional execution at the grassroots level. While the municipality has established exemplary institutional frameworks, including mandatory female representation quotas, dedicated educational scholarships, health insurance, and grassroots training programs. Ongoing issues such as child marriage, ineffective implementation of equal pay policies in the informal sector, and the continued devaluation of unpaid domestic labor heavily limit women's capabilities. The study concludes that while Suryodaya possesses highly progressive policy frameworks, holistic empowerment requires bridging the critical gap between top-down policy design and ground-level institutional management to overcome deeply entrenched patriarchal norms.

Keywords: women empowerment, social inclusion, gender equality, sustainable development.

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Introduction

In Nepal, women's empowerment has gained significant attention in recent years. It is increasingly recognized as a cornerstone for the sustainable development and harmony of society and the nation. Women's empowerment refers to the process of enabling women to participate fully in decision-making, access resources equitably, and enjoy equal rights in all aspects of life. In the context of Nepal, women make up more than half of the population, yet they continue to face systemic challenges such as unequal access to education, economic opportunities, and political participation.

The Constitution of Nepal (2015) and various national policies have prioritized gender equality and inclusive development. Local governments, as the closest institutions to the people, are tasked with implementing these policies. Municipalities thus play a crucial role in translating national commitments into practical actions.

Suryodaya Municipality, located in the Ilam district of Koshi Province, stands as a noteworthy example of local leadership actively uplifting women. Covering an area of 252.52 square kilometers, the 2078 National Census records the municipality's total population at 54,727, comprising a near-equal demographic split of 27,345 females and 27,382 males. To systematically address development, the municipality developed its First Five-Year Periodic Plan (2077/078–2081/082). Under the Social Development of this plan, gender equality and social inclusion were identified as primary drivers of municipal progress. The plan specifically outlines the "Women Empowerment Program" with two core objectives: all forms of violence against women and building capacity to increase female public participation along with self-sustainability.

Women's empowerment is understood as the process of enabling women to make choices, access resources, and participate equally in society (Kabeer, 1999). It is not only about economic independence but also about enhancing confidence, awareness, and leadership (Sen, 2001). Globally, studies show that empowering women contributes to poverty reduction and sustainable development. Education and skill training programs have improved women's income and decision-making power (World Bank, 2018).

In Nepal, the Constitution (2015) and the Local Government Operation Act (2017) ensure women's rights and representation. Research highlights that educational stipends and women's cooperatives support financial independence, though cultural barriers still exist (Acharya, 2018; Sharma, 2019). Although a number of studies in Nepal have explored issues related to women's empowerment, gender equality and social inclusion, they must have focused on a broader national or provincial context. Comparatively little attention has been given to assessing the actual impact of women-centered programs implemented by local governments under the federal governance system. In particular, studies that utilize municipal planning documents, GESI audit findings, and recent census data remain scarce. This study seeks to contribute to the existing literature by examining the women's empowerment initiatives of Suryodyaa Municipality and evaluating their role in enhancing women's social and economic well-being.

From policy rollouts with higher education funding to vocational training, challenges such as traditional norms and economic constraints still affect the full realization of these goals in local governance. Studies analyzing localized Five-Year Periodic Plans, with a specific focus on Suryodaya Municipality's interventions, using the latest 2078 Census and 2081/082 GESI audits, are limited. This research aims to fill that gap by exploring the following research questions:

1. What specific initiatives, as outlined in the Periodic Plan, has Suryodaya Municipality implemented to empower women?
2. How effective are these initiatives (particularly educational financial aids) in improving women's socio-economic lives?

3. What are the challenges and limitations faced by women in accessing and benefiting from these initiatives?

Methods

This study adopted a qualitative approach using a descriptive and analytical design. The study examined women's empowerment initiatives implemented by Suryodaya Municipality through an extensive review of existing records and official documents. Since the research focused on evaluating policies, programs, activities, and reported outcomes.

This study employs a descriptive and analytical approach, utilizing a mix of secondary municipal frameworks, national statistics, and targeted programmatic records from Suryodaya municipality. The demographic baseline was extracted from the National Population and Housing Census 2078. The policy framework was analyzed using the "Social Development" section of Suryodaya Municipality's Five-Year Periodic Plan. To measure effectiveness and institutional bottlenecks, the study analyzes the most recent "GESI Audit Report 2081/082." This is supplemented by programmatic data regarding the municipal "Daughter and Daughter-in-law Scholarship" distributions running from 2018 to the present.

The analysis was guided by a conceptual framework of women's empowerment, emphasizing access to opportunities, participation, in decision making, capacity enhancement and socio-economic inclusion. Information collected from various sources was systematically reviewed and interpreted to assess the effectiveness of municipal initiatives and identify existing challenges in promoting women's empowerment at the local level.

Results

After carefully collecting and analyzing all the documents, reports, and census numbers, a very clear picture emerged. The results of what Suryodaya Municipality has done over the past few years are extensive and highly detailed. The local government did not just try one thing to help women; they attacked the problem from many different angles. They focused on education, business, farming, mental support, and other sectors. The findings are broken down into

several key areas below.

Helping Women Learn: Educational Advancement and Public Sector Integration

In many rural families, if a family has limited money, they will spend it to educate their son. The son is expected to take care of the parents in old age, while the daughter will marry and move away to serve her husband's family. Also, once a woman is married and becomes a daughter-in-law, her new family rarely wants to pay for her to continue her schooling, as they expect her to focus entirely on heavy daily household chores and endless family responsibilities.

To fight this massive unfairness, the local government created a brilliant program called the 'Scholarship for Daughters and Daughters-in-law'. The documents show that this program is a massive success. Right now, there are exactly 249 women going to college using this scholarship. 68 women have already finished their degrees and graduated. Because of these kinds of steady programs like this, the overall number of women who can read and write in the municipality has climbed to an impressive 80.70%.

The municipality also realized that just getting a degree is not enough; women need safe, well-paying, and respected jobs. In Nepal, government jobs are highly prized because they offer a pension and ultimate job security. However, the government entrance exams, known as Loksewa, are incredibly hard, and preparation classes are very expensive. The municipality used its own money to set up completely free intensive study classes for these exams. Recently, 21 women joined the general government preparation class, and 14 women joined the teacher preparation class. This directly helps women break into the powerful world of government offices, moving them away from unreliable daily wage labor.

Helping Women Earn: Business and Legal Frameworks

To help women who want to work in business, the municipality changed its tax laws. If a business is officially registered in a man's name, he pays full taxes. But if a family registers the business officially in a woman's name, the

government gives them a massive 35% discount on all local taxes and fees. This encourages families to put money and businesses under the legal control of women.

Because of these types of pushes, the official census shows that 11.6% of women in Suryodaya now own land and property entirely in their own names. While this number seems small, in a traditional society, it is a massive breakthrough. The census also shows that 18.22% of households are led by women, meaning the woman is the legal head of the family.

In local governance, the strict rule is that 40% of all committee members are required for every project run by the user committee. In every project associated with a municipal office, the planning committee will be rejected unless four out of ten people on it are women. This forces society to accept women in decision-making roles.

Real Work in the Villages: Grassroots Interventions for Economic Self-Sustainability

A critical analysis of the municipality's internal field reports shows that it is highly sophisticated in its approach to self-sustainability. Rather than stopping at mere theoretical training, the Women, Children, and Social Welfare Section couples technical skill development directly with legally binding financial subsidies, known as seed capital, to guarantee the establishment of micro-enterprises.

Commercial Poultry Farming (Local Breeds)

In Wards 9 and 10, the government found 59 very poor, marginalized women. They did not just give them money. First, the women had to attend a strict three-day training on how to raise local breeds of chickens. Specialized trainers taught them about chicken diseases, feeding, and making proper coops. After the training, the municipality did something very smart. They made every single woman sign a legal, five-year contract promising to run a commercial chicken business. Only after signing the contract did the government hand each woman 5,000 Rupees as seed money. The field

monitoring reports show highly successful outcomes: women utilized the funds for chicks, feed, and coops. The monitoring noted that participants are actively selling poultry, retaining a baseline stock of thirty to forty birds, and utilizing the income to establish household savings. Their husbands also began to respect their new income.

Single Women Entrepreneurship Development:

Being a single woman or a widow in rural Nepal is incredibly difficult. Society often looks down on them, and they lack financial support. The municipality partnered with the higher Koshi Province Government to find 30 single women from Wards 8, 9, and 10. They brought them together for a five-day, intense business training. They taught these grieving women how to find a market, plan a business, and handle financial risks. The goal was to turn them into confident entrepreneurs who do not need to beg for help from extended family members.

The Meat Pickle Business:

To capitalize on local consumption habits and the tourists visiting Ilam, the municipality trained women across Wards 9, 10, 13, and 14 in commercial meat pickle making. They taught women how to safely and commercially make, package, and sell traditional meat pickles. Upon completion, participants received 3,000 Rupees in direct business establishment funds to purchase initial raw materials like meat, spices, and glass jars.

Disability Inclusion and Specialized Livelihoods:

The municipality designs highly tailored economic programs for persons with disabilities and their female family members. In Ward 3, advanced seven-day bag-making training was provided, supplemented by industrial sewing machines so the women could work from home. Through the disability rehabilitation program, vulnerable families were provided with one hundred percent completely free modern wooden beehives following specialized beekeeping training. This was also governed by strict contracts for commercial production and hive maintenance.

Psychosocial Support and Life Skills Education

Economic empowerment in Suryodaya is paired with psychosocial capacity building. The municipality realized that giving a woman a sewing machine or a chicken does not heal the trauma of being abused. For the Life Skills and Peer Education Manual, the municipality trains local facilitators in critical cognitive and interpersonal skills. The curriculum covers trauma handling, managing gender-based violence disclosures, different counseling approaches, and combating child marriage. This ensures that women are not just financially capable but possess the psychological resilience to navigate household pressures.

The proactive disclosures also highlight the incredibly vital, continuous, and highly funded operation of programs designed to protect women. Being a highly sensitive border region, the municipality runs continuous awareness campaigns against human trafficking in highly risky border areas like Pashupatinagar, Shree Antu etc. The branch also heavily organizes the annual sixteen days of activism against gender-based violence. This section coordinates extensive integrated reproductive health checkup camps focusing heavily on identifying and treating severe, stigmatized issues such as uterine prolapse, cervical cancer, and breast cancer screening for local women. Most importantly, the section also actively manages and fully funds the continuous health insurance renewals specifically targeted at highly vulnerable single women and widows under the age of 50.

Effectiveness of the Initiatives (GESI Audit)

When the government graded its own performance, the numbers revealed a fascinating truth about how local governments work. The 2081/082 GESI Audit Report highlights a massive paradox.

In the category of Policy and Planning Formulation, the government scored a massive 19 out of 20. This means their ideas, their rule making, and their budget planning are almost perfect. They know exactly how to write the laws to help women.

However, in the category of Institutional Management, they scored a very low 13.5 out of 20. This means they are struggling badly with the daily,

messy work of keeping track of everyone. While programs like the poultry and pickle seed grants are best in design, tracking their success across deeply rural, geographically dispersed wards strains the municipality's current bureaucratic capacity. It is easy to give 59 women chicken money; it is very hard to drive out to 59 different remote farms every month to make sure the chickens are healthy.

Implemented Initiatives and SDG Localization

With the First Five-Year Periodic Plan and localized to target Sustainable Development Goal 5 (Gender Equality), Suryodaya Municipality has implemented different initiatives designed to promote female economic dominance. The municipality's educational empowerment strategy is the widely praised flagship 'Scholarship for Daughters and Daughters-in-law') established in 2018. This program aggressively targets young women and married women who are historically discouraged from gaining advanced degrees due to different types of domestic burdens. To date, the program has achieved significant results, with 249 women currently pursuing their studies and 68 scholars having successfully graduated. In the critical realm of capacity building and structural governance, the municipal executive office strictly enforces a policy mandating a minimum of 40% female participation in all community consumer committees. Also, the municipality has launched economic support mechanisms. The local government actively organizes and fully funds intensive Public Service Commission exam preparation and Teacher Service Commission exam preparation classes. To encourage private sector female entrepreneurship, the municipality passed a highly progressive financial policy providing a massive 35% total tax and fee discount for any businesses officially registered in a woman's name. In the massive agricultural and industrial sectors, the municipality has formally adopted an "equal pay for equal work" policy. Additionally, the municipality has legally mandated the establishment of safe, private breastfeeding rooms within municipal premises to ensure civic spaces are accommodating to working mothers.

Grassroots Interventions: Women, Children, and Social Welfare Section

Analysis of the municipality's periodic Pro-active Disclosure reports

provides a transparent account of exactly how these high-level policies are executed at the grassroots level by the Women, Children, and Social Welfare Section:

Skill Development and Economic Livelihood:

The section conducts highly extensive micro-enterprise and vocational training programs tailored to the specific demands of the local agrarian and tourist economy. Driven heavily through the Micro-Enterprise Development for Poverty Alleviation (MEDPA) program, interventions include intensive Entrepreneurship Development Training, local breed poultry farming specifically designed for marginalized women, targeting local bag making, commercial pickle making, and highly developed beekeeping programs. Recently, the municipality successfully executed specialized flower nursery cultivation and bouquet-making training targeting female participants across eight wards to capture the local ecotourism market. Acknowledging cultural heritage, the municipality actively distributes traditional musical instruments (Tungna and Damphu) to indigenous Tamang women to promote cultural entrepreneurship.

Health, Extreme Protection, and Legal Mechanisms:

The disclosures highlight the continuous, highly funded operation of the municipal Gender-Based Violence (GBV) Elimination Fund. Being a highly sensitive border region, the municipality runs continuous awareness campaigns against human trafficking in vulnerable border areas like Pashupatinagar, Shreeantu actively mobilizing ward-level anti-trafficking monitoring committees. The branch organizes the annual 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence and coordinates extensive integrated reproductive health checkup camps focusing heavily on identifying and treating severe, stigmatized issues such as uterine prolapse and breast cancer. The section actively manages and fully funds continuous health insurance renewals specifically targeted at vulnerable single women and widows under the age of 50.

Social Awareness, Education, and Intergenerational Recognition:

The municipality purposefully promotes female recognition by formally

announcing the 'Municipal Mother', officially honoring the oldest woman within the municipality. To combat high rates of child marriage at its cultural root, the section conducts incredibly extensive positive parenting and guardians' awareness programs directly at the local level. To combat extreme domestic violence, the municipality conducts 'Male-Female Joint Development Trainings', bringing husbands and wives together to deconstruct patriarchal roles. Additionally, the branch legally contracts with local media outlets, such as Radio Fikkal and Radio Buddha Bani, and other local media to continuously broadcast targeted awareness messages regarding women's rights.

Discussion

The findings from Suryodaya Municipality provide an incredibly rich, deeply complex narrative that strongly aligns with, yet also aggressively challenges, highly established existing theoretical frameworks on gender empowerment. When analyzing the precise lens of Naila Kabeer's (1999) famous empowerment triad—resources, agency, and achievements—the municipality's strategic interventions demonstrate a highly successful, almost masterful mobilization of structural 'resources.' By legally mandating 40% inclusion quota in different committees, establishing and funding the massive 'Daughter and Daughter-in-law Scholarship,' providing critical widow health insurance, offering huge 35% tax discounts, and executing highly diverse, income-generating skill trainings like commercial poultry farming, flower nursery cultivation, and other different types of programs, the local government has actively, aggressively dismantled formal, structural barriers. The incredibly exceptional GESI audit score of 19 out of 20 in Policy Formulation validates that the municipality has successfully, brilliantly provided the absolute institutional pre-conditions (resources) entirely necessary for empowerment. Consequently, women have bravely utilized these resources to exercise their 'agency,' leading to tangible, massive 'achievements,' most notably reflected in the highly impressive 80.70% female literacy rate and the incredible fact that 18.22% of households are now legally female-headed.

Viewed deeply through the lens of Amartya Sen's (2001) profound Capability Approach, the municipal initiatives represent a highly deliberate expansion of fundamental human freedoms. The direct provision of massive educational stipends and highly targeted government exam preparation classes expands the actual 'capabilities' of local women, providing them with the substantive, real-world freedom to actively choose highly respected formal employment over difficult, informal, underpaid agricultural labor. The local government's incredible actions prove absolutely that highly decentralized, localized governance empowered massively by the Local Government Operation Act (2017) is incredibly capable of identifying specific, highly regional bottlenecks and deploying bespoke, impactful policies. The municipality's highly concerted, good effort to align these exact programs perfectly with the localization of Sustainable Development Goals (specifically SDG 5) demonstrates a highly progressive, visionary administrative intent.

However, the raw data also presents a stark, stark contradiction between highly progressive, brilliant policy design and deeply resistant, historically violent socio-cultural realities, sharply supporting the bleak observations of Acharya (2018) and Sharma (2019). The glaring, terrifying discrepancy between the municipality's near-perfect policy score (19/20) and its incredibly mediocre, struggling Institutional Management score (13.5/20) violently highlights the severe administrative limits of newly formed local governance. Simply writing a brilliant, progressive policy legally guaranteeing 'equal pay for equal work' is a great achievement; actually, enforcing it daily across dozens of highly remote, informal tea estates and vast agricultural blocks requires an institutional monitoring capacity and physical enforcement mechanism that the municipality currently, unfortunately, lacks. This severe management deficit actively allows historical economic exploitation in the massive informal sector to continue entirely unabated despite highly progressive legislation existing perfectly on paper.

The terrifying persistence of above 25% child marriage rate, despite massive, unprecedented financial investments in female education, sanitary

hygiene, and scholarships, violently exposes the profound, terrifying resilience of deeply rooted Hindu and indigenous patriarchal cultural norms. This shows a sad but true reality: government rules and laws can change very fast, but people's old habits, traditions, and ways of thinking take a very long time to change. It proves entirely that top-down financial aid, free sanitary pads, and numerical political participation quotas cannot, by themselves, completely dismantle violent traditional norms without equally massive, robust grassroots management and highly aggressive social behavioral interventions. While a local family may happily accept a massive municipal financial scholarship for their young daughter, along with their daughter-in-law.

While the municipality forces a 40% female quota in different committees to ensure high political agency, it does not possess any policy tools to legally force a fair redistribution of domestic chores within the private home. As a direct, terrible result, women strongly participating in these powerful committees frequently suffer from severe time poverty and psychological stress. They are granted a seat at the table in the public sphere, but remain entirely chained to traditional, highly subservient, exhausting roles in the private sphere. This 'double burden' severely dilutes the actual quality of their political participation, turning a highly genuine, brilliant opportunity for absolute leadership into a mere exhausted and tokenistic presence.

However, the highly detailed operational reports from the Women, Children, and Social Welfare Section prove absolutely that localized, intense, branch-level execution, such as targeted vocational training, the mobilization of the GBV fund, and

Anti-trafficking monitoring is the absolute most critical, vital mechanism for actively bridging this gap between perfect policy and highly imperfect practice. The proactive disclosures and best practice document reveal definitively that when institutional management is highly focused, incredibly transparent, and directly engaged with the local community through guardian's awareness programs, male-female joint development trainings, continuous local radio awareness campaigns,

specialized reproductive health camps, and massive human trafficking interaction sessions, real-world behavioral shifts actually occur. Therefore, the future of absolute women's empowerment in Suryodaya relies not merely on writing even better policies, but on massively upgrading the physical and human institutional management capacity to enforce them.

Conclusion

Suryodaya Municipality is an example of how a small, local government can take steps to change the lives of women in our society. They have not just talked about equality; they have put their money where their mouth is. By creating clear rules based on solid data, they have built a visionary system that is actively making life better for lots of people. By doing this, the town has firmly positioned itself as a highly progressive, undeniable leader in decentralized local governance within the entirety of Nepal.

The successes are clear and beautiful to see. The intense strategic focus that was perfectly strong in the First Five-Year Periodic Plan has yielded incredibly tangible, transformative results. Because of the local government's funding, there are 249 women currently studying in universities who might otherwise be sitting at home. There are 68 women who have graduated and are ready to change the world. There are single women running businesses, mothers earning money from meat pickles, and disabled families surviving through beekeeping. The town's ability to design these policies is incredible, earning them near-perfect grades in planning.

However, the journey is only half finished. The lower grades in daily management show that the challenge has changed. The highly active local government is no longer struggling with creating good, progressive policies. Instead, it is struggling violently with the massive, complex logistics of executing, policing, and strictly enforcing those policies across a highly rugged, completely informal agrarian and tourist economy. Additionally, the unacceptable persistence of a high child marriage rate standing at over twenty-eight percent definitively indicates that highly progressive structural empowerment is currently colliding

with incredibly resilient, centuries-old patriarchal norms.

To make this empowerment truly permanent and sustainable, the local government must take highly specific actions moving forward.

First, they must build a robust monitoring system. The town needs to hire or train local field workers and inspectors who can travel to the tea gardens and rural farms to ruthlessly enforce wage parity across all informal sectors, ensuring women are paid fairly for their physical labor.

Second, the town must provide continuous mentorship for the women who complete training programs. When a woman is given 5,000 Rupees for a chicken farm, agricultural experts must visit her monthly to ensure her business survives diseases and market fluctuations. The government must be by her side, not just on the day of the training, but for the years that follow.

Third, highly progressive financial frameworks must be forcefully coupled with strict, uncompromising, and highly enforced anti-child marriage laws. The government must make it incredibly clear that there are severe legal consequences for participating in or arranging a child marriage.

Finally, and most importantly, the government must start fighting the invisible wars inside the household. The municipality must massively expand its highly innovative current guardians' awareness campaigns, integrated health outreach, and male-female joint development programs. They must continue to aggressively educate men, husbands, and community elders to permanently dismantle traditional expectations. They must teach the community that it is not shameful for a man to sweep the floor or cook the rice. Until the heavy burden of daily household chores is lifted off the shoulders of women, they will always be too tired to truly rule the world they are now legally allowed to enter. Only by aggressively addressing the private, cultural beliefs of the population with the exact same immense vigor, funding, and legal authority applied to the public sphere can Suryodaya Municipality finally achieve absolute, unshakeable gender equity. The laws of Suryodaya have finally opened the door; now, the culture must change so women can walk through it freely.

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