

Educational Inequality and Social Mobility in Karnali Province of Nepal: A Sociological Analysis

Krishna Prasad Neupane

Jaljala Multiple Campus, Libang, Rolpa

Mid-West University, Nepal

Email: neupane92@gmail.com

Article History: Received: 5 October 2025, Revised: 5 September 2025, Accepted: 20 January 2026

Corresponding Author: Krishna Prasad Neupane ✉: eupane92@gmail.com

Copyright Information: Copyright 2026 © The author(s). This journal is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International \(CC BY 4.0\) License](#).

Abstract

This article examines how educational inequality shapes social mobility in Nepal, with particular attention to Karnali Province. The study used a descriptive and analytical design based on secondary data from the Central Bureau of Statistics, EMIS, provincial education reports, and publications of agencies such as UNESCO, UNICEF, and UNDP. Key indicators include literacy, enrolment and retention, access to secondary and higher education, and disparities by gender, caste, and province. Sociological theories of stratification and mobility guide the interpretation of these patterns and help explain how structural conditions influence people's life chances. The findings showed that Karnali consistently lags behind the national average in literacy, school retention, educational expenditure, and access to higher education, and it records one of the lowest intergenerational mobility scores in the country. Girls, Dalit communities, and children from poor households face particularly high risks of dropout and exclusion from advanced schooling. These gaps are reinforced by geographic isolation, weak institutional capacity, and persistent socio-cultural barriers. Educational inequality in Karnali therefore appears not only as a statistical difference but as a major obstacle to upward mobility and local development. The study argues that narrowing these provincial gaps is essential for promoting fair social mobility in Nepal. It calls for targeted policies that improve resources, strengthen provincial and local institutions, and prioritize inclusive measures for marginalized groups in Karnali.

Keywords: Caste and gender dynamics, Educational inequality, Provincial disparities, Social mobility, Structural barriers

Introduction

Education is universally recognized as one of the most transformative forces shaping human development and societal progress. It serves not only as a medium for transmitting knowledge, skills, and cultural values, but also as a powerful institution through which societies pursue equity, social justice, and economic opportunity (Durkheim, 1922; Sen, 1999). As a catalyst of empowerment, education enables individuals to enhance their capabilities, express their agency, participate meaningfully in public life, and improve their socioeconomic well-being (Boudon, 1974; Parsons, 1951). In countless communities, particularly those in developing nations, education represents the most reliable pathway for breaking persistent cycles of poverty, exclusion, and marginalization (Tilak, 2015; UNESCO, 2023). It carries the promise of hope: the belief that any child, regardless of background, can imagine and achieve a future different from previous generations.

Yet, the ideal of education as a level playing field is often complicated by deep-rooted structural inequalities. In Nepal—marked by centuries-old hierarchies, cultural diversity, rugged terrain, and pronounced socioeconomic variation—the education system mirrors broader patterns of social stratification (Bista, 2020; Pherali, 2011). Longstanding disparities linked to caste identity, ethnic affiliation, gender norms, poverty, and geography continue to shape who accesses quality education and who remains excluded (Khadka, 2021; Neupane, n.d.). While national policies

emphasize inclusion, equity, and universal basic education (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology [MoEST], 2022), the lived experiences of many communities reveal an unequal distribution of resources, opportunities, and outcomes. Thus, education becomes both a ladder for social mobility and a mirror reflecting the systemic barriers that prevent many individuals from realizing their full potential.

Karnali Province, the least developed and most geographically isolated region of Nepal, illustrates this national dilemma with particular intensity. Its mountainous terrain, limited infrastructure, fragile economy, and scattered settlements create extraordinary challenges for delivering educational services (Central Bureau of Statistics [CBS], 2021; UNICEF, 2022). Although reforms and investments over the last two decades have expanded school access, the sustainability and quality of these improvements remain uneven. According to the Central Bureau of Statistics, the literacy rate in Karnali stands at just 66.3%, far below the national average of 76.3%. These figures mask even deeper disparities between urban centers like Birendranagar and remote districts such as Mugu, Dolpa, and Humla, where students frequently walk hours to school, confront severe teacher shortages, and study in inadequately equipped classrooms (MoEST, 2023). Many schools continue to lack digital resources, trained educators, and safe learning environments, making effective teaching and learning extremely challenging.

Socio-cultural realities further restrict educational participation in Karnali. Traditional gender norms, agricultural responsibilities, demands for child labor, and early marriage practices disproportionately limit opportunities for girls, Dalits, and other marginalized groups (Bista, 2020; Chalaune, 2025). Economic hardships ranging from food insecurity to seasonal migration—push families to prioritize immediate survival over long-term educational goals (Gurung, 2022; Khadka, 2021). The Karnali Province Education Sector Plan (2022–2026) identifies persistent issues such as high dropout rates, poor secondary level retention, weak school governance, and low representation of disadvantaged communities in higher education (MoEST, 2023). These obstacles combine to form a structural environment where educational inequality is not merely a statistical indicator but a daily lived experience.

The sociological implications of such disparities extend far beyond schooling. From a functionalist perspective, education ideally promotes meritocracy, rewarding talent and effort irrespective of background (Durkheim, 1922; Parsons, 1951). However, conflict theorists and scholars such as Bourdieu (1977) argue that education often reinforces social inequalities by privileging those who already possess cultural capital—such as language, behaviors, and exposure aligned with dominant institutional expectations. In Karnali, where many children come from culturally and economically marginalized backgrounds, schools may inadvertently favor students from higher caste, urban, or economically stable families. Consequently, education may reproduce existing hierarchies and restrict social mobility rather than facilitating emancipation (Boudon, 1974; Bowles & Gintis, 1976).

This central tension, education as a force for liberation versus a tool of social reproduction, remains fundamental to understanding patterns of inequality across Nepal. Although the Constitution of Nepal guarantees free and compulsory basic education and promotes inclusive policies, gaps in

implementation remain substantial (Subedi, 2022). Rural–urban disparities, infrastructure shortages, poverty-related dropouts, and migration continue to undermine the transformative potential of education (Kanwal & Munir, 2015; Tilak, 2015). Exclusion from quality education equates to exclusion from skilled employment, political participation, and meaningful economic mobility. Many individuals find themselves limited to low-income occupations, perpetuating intergenerational poverty and thwarting hopes for upward mobility (Bista, 2020; Neupane, n.d.). Studying educational inequality in Karnali is therefore both an academic necessity and a moral imperative. Understanding how these disparities shape individual life trajectories, whether through occupational shifts, income changes, or social recognition, provides insight into Nepal’s broader socioeconomic fabric. By examining the interplay of structural constraints, cultural norms, policy frameworks, and institutional practices, this research aims to illuminate how education can both enable and restrict social mobility in one of Nepal’s most marginalized regions (UNDP, 2022; UNICEF, 2022).

Furthermore, this study situates Karnali within the evolving landscape of post-federalization Nepal. Since 2015, provinces have enjoyed greater authority over education governance, planning, and budgeting (Subedi, 2022). While these reforms aim to address regional inequalities, persistent gaps in Karnali raise critical questions about the adequacy, inclusiveness, and effectiveness of decentralized education systems. Strengthening local institutions, improving resource allocation, and ensuring accountability remain major challenges for the future (MoEST, 2023). Accordingly, a comprehensive investigation into the multidimensional nature of educational inequality and its consequences for social mobility is essential. A nuanced sociological analysis not only enriches academic understanding, but also offers actionable insights for policymakers, educators, and development practitioners striving to transform education into a true instrument of social justice, human dignity, and equitable development across Nepal (Sen, 1999; UNESCO, 2023).

Objectives

The principal objective of this study is to examine how educational inequality influences patterns of social mobility in Karnali Province of Nepal. Specifically, the research aims to analyze the socio-economic, cultural, and structural factors that create disparities in educational access and outcomes and to explore how these disparities translate into unequal opportunities for upward mobility.

Literature Review

Education, as both a driver and inhibitor of social mobility, has occupied a central place in sociological analysis for generations. Classical sociological theorists offered varied interpretations of the role of education in shaping life chances and social hierarchy. Functionalists such as Durkheim (1922) argued that education fosters moral unity, shared values, and social cohesion by preparing individuals to fulfill roles expected of them in society. Parsons (1951) extended this perspective, explaining that schools serve as “sorting mechanisms” that reward effort and talent, thus facilitating meritocratic allocation to occupational positions. In this view, educational attainment serves as a legitimate pathway to upward mobility; differential achievement is seen as the natural basis of inequality.

By contrast, conflict theorists have long challenged the assumption of educational neutrality. Marx (1848) conceived education as a component of the ideological state apparatus that sustains capitalist domination. Building further, Bourdieu (1977) introduced the concept of cultural capital to illustrate how inherited linguistic styles, cultural dispositions, and institutional familiarity inform academic success. Educational institutions, he argued, fail to operate neutrally, disproportionately rewarding the attributes of high-status groups while reproducing established hierarchies through “symbolic violence” and habitus. Bowles and Gintis (1976), in their correspondence theory, asserted that school structures mirror workplace hierarchies, with working-class children prepared for subordinate labor roles through subtle, hidden curricula. Collectively, these theories emphasize that education can reproduce, rather than reduce, social inequality.

Contemporary scholarship further complicates this picture, acknowledging the impact of globalisation, neoliberalism, privatization, and decentralization in reshaping the relationship between education and inequality. Collins (1979) notes the phenomenon of credential inflation, where increasing educational attainment leads to greater competition and stratification rather than enhanced mobility. Sen’s capability approach (1999) highlights how education expands individual capabilities, but structural barriers—such as poverty, gender norms, and social exclusion—often constrain people’s ability to convert schooling into meaningful opportunities. Boudon (1974) adds nuance by distinguishing between primary and secondary effects of family background on educational outcomes, ranging from early academic performance to decision-making about continued schooling.

International research underscores that educational inequality is a global concern, manifesting in diverse ways across regions. UNESCO (2023) documents persistent disparities in access, retention, and learning achievement, particularly in developing contexts. South Asia, one of the world’s youngest regions, has achieved progress in enrollment rates but continues to face chronic inequalities: over 50 million children remain out of school, with the burden falling disproportionately due to gender norms, economic deprivation, ethnic and caste discrimination, and geographic remoteness. Tilak (2015) describes this trend as “mass schooling without transformation,” noting expansion in school access has not led to uniform improvements in social outcomes. Aikara (2010) and Ahmed and Hasan (2012) show that mountainous and remote communities experience persistent obstacles such as distance to schools, teacher shortages, poor infrastructure, and language gaps—all of which impact learning.

Comparative studies from Bhutan, northern India, and Bangladesh reveal similar patterns of educational disadvantage in isolated areas, including lower participation in secondary education and reduced progression to higher learning. Kanwal and Munir (2015) demonstrate a strong association between educational and income inequality in South Asia, indicating that schooling disparities significantly contribute to intergenerational mobility. Byun and Park (2017), examining effectively maintained inequality, argue that as access to schooling expands, high-SES groups shift advantage toward higher-quality institutions, private schooling, and advanced tracks, thereby maintaining social hierarchies.

Nepal’s education system replicates many of these complexities. Historical analysis indicates that reforms since the 1950s, particularly during the Panchayat era, expanded access but

disproportionately benefited urban elites. Pherali (2011) documents that educational structures often reinforce hierarchical divisions, especially through language policies and the uneven growth of private schools. The School Sector Development Plan (2016–2023) identifies persistent disparities across provinces and demographic groups, marked by gaps in secondary-level transition, teacher availability, and learning outcomes.

Provincial disparities in Nepal remain striking. According to CBS (2021), literacy rates exceed 85% in Bagmati Province but dip below 67% in Karnali. Girls continue to fall behind boys in secondary and tertiary education, especially in rural, low-income households. Dalit and Janajati communities often suffer cultural exclusion and economic hardship, resulting in uneven educational trajectories (Neupane, n.d.; Bista, 2020). Research on technical and vocational education highlights that reforms aiming to improve job-oriented skills have sometimes reinforced inequality, as students from less affluent families struggle to afford training and secure job placements (Dhobi, n.d.).

Nepal's federal restructuring in 2015 sought to address these inequalities by decentralizing educational governance. Subedi (2022) finds that provinces such as Karnali struggle with insufficient trained personnel, limited financial autonomy, and weak institutional systems, complicating the effective implementation of new policies. The Education Act (2016) devolved functions to local governments, but without adequate support, decentralization sometimes exacerbates rather than mitigates educational inequality. Literature on Karnali Province is expanding, though national studies still dominate the discourse. Human Development Reports consistently place Karnali at the lowest ranks for education and HDI (UNDP, 2022). Focused studies reveal poor retention in basic education, high dropout rates in secondary school, early labor force participation, and extremely low inclusion in higher education programs. MoEST (2023) reports that only 2% of Karnali's students reach university-level education, while secondary-level dropout rates exceed 23%, compared to 14% nationally. Teacher absenteeism, limited training, multi-grade teaching, and harsh climate conditions further impede achievement.

Geographic isolation remains a critical determinant of disadvantage. Many Karnali villages lack roads, electricity, and communication, making school access difficult. Studies by Khadka (2021) and Gurung (2022) detail how subsistence agriculture, migration, seasonal labor, and family responsibilities shape children's ability to persist with schooling. Caste and ethnic dynamics also interact with geography, intensifying disadvantage for Dalit, Janajati, and other marginalized groups. Seasonal migration to India often disrupts children's attendance and diminishes educational aspirations (Bista, 2020). Further research demonstrates that secondary school attainment in rural Nepal is influenced by gender norms, household landholding, and parental literacy, as well as teacher–student ratios (Neupane, n.d.). Work on Dalit education (Chalaune, 2025) confirms that despite policy commitments, discrimination and institutional neglect endure. Studies such as Byun and Park (2017) underline that broader access does not erase inequality; advantage shifts to new dimensions including school quality, medium of instruction, and private tutoring.

Overall, the reviewed literature reveals that educational inequality and social mobility in Nepal are deeply interlinked, shaped by complex factors including gender, caste, ethnicity, geography, governance, and economic status. Although national-level disparities are well documented, there is a

growing need for research into how these inequalities operate in specific provinces such as Karnali, particularly in the context of post-federalization reforms. This study addresses that gap by applying sociological theory and triangulated secondary data to analyze how educational inequality in Karnali Province influences opportunities for social mobility in one of Nepal's most structurally disadvantaged regions.

Theoretical Framework

This study uses a combined theoretical lens that brings together structural–functional, conflict, social reproduction, capability, and social mobility perspectives. The functionalist view helps to show how stronger education systems can integrate people into society and open up paths for mobility, especially in better-resourced provinces. In contrast, conflict and reproduction theories (Marx, Bourdieu, Bowles & Gintis) draw attention to how unequal resources and cultural hierarchies in places like Karnali keep class, caste, gender, and regional gaps alive, even when schools are formally available. Sen's capability approach and work on social mobility further underline that simply being enrolled in school is not enough; real opportunities depend on whether students have the economic and geographic conditions needed to turn education into meaningful change in their lives.

Methodology

This study follows a quantitative, descriptive–comparative research design based on secondary data, with analysis guided by sociological theories of stratification and social mobility to examine educational inequality and social mobility in Nepal, with special focus on Karnali Province. The descriptive part presents recent provincial patterns in literacy, enrolment, retention, and higher education access, while the analytical part interprets these patterns using sociological theories of stratification and mobility.

The analysis is based on secondary data only. Main sources are the latest reports of the Central Bureau of Statistics (2021–2023), EMIS data and other publications of the Ministry of Education, provincial education profiles for Karnali, and selected reports of UNESCO, UNICEF, and UNDP published between 2018 and 2023. Data were collected in three steps. First, relevant official reports were identified and downloaded from government and agency websites. Second, provincial statistics on literacy, enrolment, retention, gender parity, school types, expenditure, and mobility-related indicators were extracted into a single table. Third, figures were cross-checked across documents to ensure that the most recent and consistent values were used. Educational inequality was measured through indicators such as literacy rates, enrolment and retention, Gender Parity Index, and access to secondary and higher education. Social mobility was approximated using intergenerational mobility indices and the relationship between higher education and movement from low-income to middle-income groups. Descriptive statistics and comparative tables were used for analysis, and findings were interpreted through functionalist and conflict perspectives.

Results and Analysis

Nepal's education system continues to reflect deep structural inequalities shaped by geography, social hierarchies, gender norms, and economic disparities. Despite significant efforts following the federal restructuring of 2015 which expanded school networks, increased enrolment in basic education, and aimed to promote more equitable access the benefits of these reforms have not been evenly distributed across the country. Many provinces, particularly those that are remote or

resource-poor, continue to face persistent challenges in educational access and quality. Among them, Karnali Province stands out as the most educationally disadvantaged region. The province consistently lags behind national averages in key indicators such as literacy, school enrolment, student retention, public investment in education, access to institutions, and overall measures of social mobility. Geographic isolation, limited infrastructure, and socio-economic constraints exacerbate these disparities, making it difficult for students in Karnali to compete on an equal footing with peers from more developed regions. As a result, educational inequality in the province not only limits individual opportunities but also perpetuates broader patterns of social and economic disadvantage.

Table 1: *Literacy and Retention by Province (2022–2023)*

| Province | Literacy (%) | Gender Gap (pp) | Retention (Grade 1–10) (%) | Primary Enrolment (%) | Secondary Enrolment (%) |
|---------------|--------------|-----------------|----------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| Bagmati | 86.3 | 9.6 | 78.3 | 98.6 | 86.2 |
| Gandaki | 84.9 | 10.3 | 74.6 | 97.4 | 84.3 |
| Koshi | 82.9 | 12.8 | 71.0 | 97.2 | 82.5 |
| Lumbini | 77.3 | 16.4 | 63.9 | 95.1 | 76.0 |
| Sudurpashchim | 74.8 | 17.2 | 60.1 | 93.4 | 71.2 |
| Madhesh | 71.1 | 19.3 | 59.2 | 92.8 | 69.7 |
| Karnali | 66.4 | 22.9 | 52.5 | 89.3 | 61.8 |
| National Avg | 77.7 | 15.3 | 65.6 | 94.8 | 75.9 |

Source: Central Bureau of Statistics, *Socio-Economic Indicators of Nepal: Provincial Comparison Report 2023*; Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, *Education Management Information System (EMIS) Report 2022*.

The data in Table 1 reveal a pronounced spatial and gendered divide in literacy and school participation across Nepal, reflecting deep-seated structural inequalities. Provinces such as Bagmati (86.3%) and Gandaki (84.9%) demonstrate the highest literacy rates, which can be attributed to a combination of urbanization, better transportation and communication networks, higher household incomes, and decades of sustained investment in education by both government and private actors. These provinces also exhibit comparatively narrow gender gaps 9.6 and 10.3 percentage points suggesting that schooling opportunities for girls are more accessible, socially supported, and culturally valued in urban and semi-urban environments. Such conditions foster not only higher enrollment but also improved retention and performance, allowing students to benefit from a continuum of educational opportunities that strengthen their future social and economic prospects.

In contrast, Karnali Province records the lowest literacy rate nationally at 66.4%, highlighting how geographic isolation and structural disadvantage shape educational outcomes. The province also faces the widest gender gap, at 22.9 percentage points, underscoring persistent barriers that girls encounter in remote regions. These barriers include household labor responsibilities, long

and often dangerous journeys to reach schools, limited availability of secondary and higher-level institutions, and cultural norms that prioritize domestic and caregiving roles for girls. Additionally, in subsistence economies like Karnali, families often weigh the immediate costs of education against daily survival needs, further restricting girls' participation in schooling. Retention rates amplify these disparities. Only 52.5% of students in Karnali who start Grade 1 continue to Grade 10, reflecting patterns of cumulative disadvantage where early educational setbacks compound over time, reducing the likelihood of achieving higher levels of learning. By comparison, provinces such as Bagmati (78.3%) and Gandaki (74.6%) maintain higher retention rates, supported by better school infrastructure, the consistent presence of trained teachers, and lower incidence of child labor. These conditions not only facilitate sustained participation in schooling but also create a more predictable and supportive learning environment for students.

Secondary enrolment further illustrates the education and mobility divide. In Karnali, only 61.8% of children progress to secondary education, trailing Bagmati by 24.4 percentage points. This gap signals those children in peripheral regions face far greater structural and socio-cultural constraints in transitioning from basic to higher levels of education—an essential stepping stone for socio-economic mobility, skill development, and future employment opportunities. Combined, these indicators underscore the multifaceted nature of educational inequality in Nepal, demonstrating that geography, gender, social norms, and economic pressures interact to shape who benefits from education and who remains excluded. For regions like Karnali, these disparities not only limit individual opportunities but also reinforce intergenerational cycles of disadvantage, making education both a mirror of inequality and a potential pathway toward social change.

Educational Expenditure and Institutional Access

Table 2: *Education Investment and Access (2022)*

| Province | Per Capita Expenditure (NPR) | Public School Share (%) | Private School Share (%) |
|-----------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Bagmati | 6,800 | 55 | 45 |
| Gandaki | 6,200 | 62 | 38 |
| Koshi | 5,200 | 68 | 32 |
| Lumbini | 4,800 | 70 | 30 |
| Sudurpashchim | 4,400 | 76 | 24 |
| Madhesh | 4,100 | 74 | 26 |
| Karnali | 3,600 | 82 | 18 |
| National Avg | 5,014 | 70 | 30 |

Source: MoF & Provincial Economic Surveys 2022–23.

Provincial differences in educational investment clearly show how unevenly state resources are distributed across Nepal. Bagmati and Gandaki, for example, spend the most per person—NPR 6,800 and NPR 6,200—because they benefit from stronger provincial economies, higher revenue generation, and more capable administrative systems. These higher investments translate into practical advantages: more trained teachers, better-equipped classrooms, reliable school

infrastructure, ICT facilities, and overall stronger school management. Karnali, however, receives only NPR 3,600 per capita—barely half of Bagmati’s spending. This chronic underinvestment creates a chain reaction of challenges: persistent teacher shortages, a lack of subject specialists in higher grades, poor classroom conditions, and minimal access to digital tools. Since the quality of education is closely tied to financial investment, limited budgets directly constrain children’s learning opportunities and their chances for future economic mobility.

Another layer of inequality appears in the type of schools available. In Karnali, 82% of students rely on public schools, largely because private schools struggle to operate in areas with scattered settlements, rugged geography, and weak market potential. In contrast, private schools make up about 45% of institutions in Bagmati, giving families more options and often pushing schools to compete and improve. In provinces like Karnali and Madhesh, the dominance of public schools is less a sign of equitable access and more a reflection of structural limitations. Viewed sociologically, these uneven investments and limited institutional choices reproduce patterns of educational inequality. Children growing up in wealthier, better-supported provinces gain access to higher-quality learning, stronger exam performance, and improved pathways for upward mobility. Meanwhile, children in under-resourced provinces face obstacles that have little to do with their effort or talent, revealing how systemic disparities shape life chances from an early age.

Higher Education and Social Mobility Indicators

Table 3: *Intergenerational Mobility Index by Province (2023)*

| Province | Mobility Index |
|---------------|----------------|
| Bagmati | 0.52 |
| Gandaki | 0.50 |
| Koshi | 0.48 |
| Lumbini | 0.42 |
| Sudurpashchim | 0.37 |
| Madhesh | 0.33 |
| Karnali | 0.31 |
| National Avg | 0.46 |

Source: *NLSS and CBS socio-economic data, 2023.*

The unequal spread of higher education institutions across Nepal has a powerful influence on how easily people can improve their social and economic status from one generation to the next. Provinces such as Bagmati and Gandaki host a large share of the country’s colleges and universities, forming well-developed educational hubs closely connected to urban job markets and professional networks. Their mobility indices—0.52 for Bagmati and 0.50 for Gandaki show how these advantages translate into real opportunities, giving children from low-income families a much stronger chance of rising into higher socio-economic groups.

Karnali, in contrast, has only 5.7% of Nepal’s higher education institutions. This limited availability creates a significant barrier for students seeking tertiary education. The province’s mobility index of 0.31 the lowest nationwide reveals how geographical isolation reduces economic prospects. Many students are forced to migrate elsewhere for higher studies, but financial constraints,

cultural barriers, and the social difficulties of relocation often make this impossible, particularly for women and Dalit students who face additional layers of disadvantage.

The broader national data reinforces how closely education is tied to mobility: individuals with higher education are 3.5 times more likely to move from low-income to middle-income groups. Because of this strong link, provinces lacking robust higher education systems unintentionally restrict the mobility of their residents. This is what sociologists describe as the “spatial reproduction of inequality” a pattern where place-based disadvantages become long-term obstacles. When students in remote regions do not have access to quality higher education or a supportive environment to pursue it, their opportunities for a better future remain limited long before they even enter the workforce.

Gender and Caste Indicators

Table 4: *Gender and Caste Dimensions of Educational Inequality*

| Province | Female Literacy Level | Gender Gap in Literacy | Dalit Student Participation | Dalit Dropout Risk After Grade 8 | Notes / Key Observations |
|---------------|-----------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------------|--|
| Bagmati | High | Low | Medium | Medium | Urbanized province with stronger schooling environment; Dalit and female inclusion relatively better. |
| Gandaki | High | Low | Medium | Medium | Good educational access; gender and caste gaps remain but are narrower than national average. |
| Koshi | Medium | Medium | Medium | Medium | Moderate disparities; Dalit and female participation improving but still affected by economic constraints. |
| Lumbini | Medium | Medium–High | Medium–Low | High | Marginalized groups face higher dropout, especially in rural belts. |
| Sudurpashchim | Medium–Low | High | Low | High | High gender gap and caste-based participation inequality; rural geography increases vulnerability. |
| Madhesh | Low | High | Low | Very High | Strong gender norms, early marriage, and caste hierarchy elevate dropout risk. |

| | | | | | |
|---------|--------|---------|--------|---|--|
| Karnali | Lowest | Highest | Lowest | Very High (Dalit girls twice as likely to drop out) | Extreme geographic, economic, gender, and caste barriers reinforce multi-dimensional disadvantage. |
|---------|--------|---------|--------|---|--|

Source: Based on CBS 2021, EMIS 2022, UNICEF 2022; interpreted from qualitative and quantitative patterns described in the study.

Table 4 shows that gender- and caste-based educational inequalities follow a clear spatial pattern, with the most severe disadvantages concentrated in Madhesh, Sudurpashchim, and especially Karnali. Provinces with stronger urbanization and institutional capacity, such as Bagmati and Gandaki, demonstrate higher female literacy, narrower gender gaps, and moderate Dalit participation. In contrast, Karnali and Madhesh record the lowest female literacy, widest gender gaps, and the highest dropout risks among Dalit students—particularly Dalit girls, who are twice as likely to leave school after Grade 8. These disparities reflect the combined effects of geographic isolation, patriarchal norms, caste hierarchy, and economic hardship, which together limit equitable access to education and reinforce intergenerational exclusion. The results show a clear pattern of spatial inequality in Nepal’s education system, with Karnali Province consistently below the national average in literacy, retention, school participation, educational investment, access to higher education, and intergenerational mobility. Provinces such as Bagmati and Gandaki perform much better on these indicators, while Karnali has the lowest literacy, widest gender gaps, weakest retention, and one of the lowest mobility scores.

The data further indicate that girls, Dalit students, and children from poor households in Karnali are more likely to drop out and less likely to reach secondary and higher education than similar groups in better-resourced provinces. Overall, educational opportunities and mobility prospects in Nepal vary sharply by province, gender, caste, and socio-economic status, with remote regions like Karnali facing the greatest disadvantage.

Discussion

The findings show that educational inequality in Nepal is long-standing and structurally embedded rather than temporary. This matches South Asian studies that argue reforms have not removed deep social and regional inequalities; instead, provinces like Karnali remain at the bottom in literacy, retention, and higher education participation despite overall expansion in schooling (Tilak, 2015; Pherali, 2011; Khadka, 2021). The persistent center-periphery gap therefore confirms rather than contradicts earlier claims that access has grown without transforming underlying structures. From a structural–functional view, the relatively strong outcomes of Bagmati and Gandaki match the expectation that well-resourced education systems integrate individuals and support mobility, through better infrastructure, diverse opportunities, and higher returns to schooling. By contrast, the case of Karnali supports Merton’s idea of institutional dysfunction: although schools are present, weak facilities and high dropout mean that formal structures do not achieve their intended goals. This result therefore, contradicts any simplistic assumption that physical expansion of schools alone is enough to ensure equal mobility chances. Conflict and reproduction theories are also largely supported by the data. The concentration of high-quality, often private or English-medium schools in urban, wealthier areas, and the disadvantages faced by Dalit, Janajati, and poor students in

Karnali and Madhesh, match the patterns described by Bourdieu and by empirical work on effectively maintained inequality (Byun & Park, 2017; Kanwal & Munir, 2015). The evidence of “mobility without transformation,” where education raises aspirations but not outcomes for marginalized groups, similarly aligns with UNICEF (2022) and Bista (2020).

The experience of federalization partly matches and partly qualifies policy expectations. Sector plans (SSDP 2016–2023; School Education Sector Plan 2022–2032) emphasize equity and provincial responsibility, but the provincial data contradict the hope that decentralization alone would narrow gaps: richer provinces appear better able to use new powers, while Karnali still struggles with limited budgets, staff shortages, and difficult geography. This outcome supports other warnings that decentralization can widen regional disparities when weaker provinces lack sufficient support.

Intersecting inequalities of gender, caste, and class in Karnali also match previous research. Higher dropout and lower progression among girls and Dalit students in this province reflect the same disadvantages documented in Nepali and South Asian literature on marginalized groups in schooling (Aikara, 2010; Ahmed & Hasan, 2012; Chalaune, 2025). Finally, the difficulty that Karnali’s youth face in converting education into secure, rewarding work aligns with Giddens’ notion of a gap between aspiration and structure and matches national and regional reports that link limited local opportunities to out-migration and frustrated mobility (UNICEF, 2022; Bista, 2020). Overall, the study’s results largely confirm the broader body of literature, while adding more detailed provincial evidence on how severely Karnali lags behind better-resourced regions and why region-sensitive, equity-oriented strategies are needed.

Conclusion

This study shows that educational inequality in Nepal is persistent and strongly shaped by region, with Karnali Province repeatedly performing worst on key education indicators, especially for girls, Dalit communities, and low-income households. These patterns match earlier South Asian and Nepali research that links expanded schooling with continued structural inequality and support theories that view education as both a route to mobility and a mechanism that can reproduce existing hierarchies when resources are uneven. Since this analysis is based only on secondary, quantitative data, it cannot capture detailed local experiences, pointing to the need for future qualitative or mixed-method studies in Karnali. Even so, the findings suggest that targeted investment, stronger school infrastructure and teacher support, and focused measures for marginalized groups are essential if education is to contribute more effectively to fair social mobility in Nepal.

Author's Biography

Krishna Prasad Neupane is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at Jaljala Multiple Campus, Rolpa, affiliated with Mid-West University, Nepal. His research focuses on educational inequality and its impact on social mobility in Nepal.

References

- Ahmed, M., & Hasan, M. (2012). *Education and development in South Asia*. Routledge.
- Aikara, J. (2010). Access and equity: A case of school education in India. *Indian Journal of Social Development, 10*(2), 259–276.
- Bista, M. B. (2020). *Education and social inequality in Nepal*. Mandala Book Point.

- Boudon, R. (1974). *Education, opportunity, and social inequality*. Wiley.
- Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a theory of practice*. Cambridge University Press.
- Bowles, S., & Gintis, H. (1976). *Schooling in capitalist America: Educational reform and the contradictions of economic life*. Basic Books.
- Byun, S., & Park, H. (2017). The persistent advantage of EMI: Effectively maintained inequality in South Korea. *Sociology of Education*, 90(4), 343–363.
- Central Bureau of Statistics. (2021). *National population and housing census 2021: National report*. Government of Nepal.
- Central Bureau of Statistics. (2023). *Socio-economic indicators of Nepal: Provincial comparison report*. Government of Nepal.
- Chalaune, B. (2025). *Dalit education and structural barriers in rural Nepal*. Social Inclusion Research Centre.
- Collins, R. (1979). *The credential society: A historical sociology of education and stratification*. Academic Press.
- Dhobi, R. (n.d.). Technical and vocational education in Nepal: Challenges of equity and access. Council for Technical Education and Vocational Training.
- Durkheim, É. (1922). *Education and sociology*. Free Press.
- Gurung, K. (2022). Educational challenges in remote Himalayan communities. *Journal of Himalayan Studies*, 14(1), 45–58.
- Kanwal, S., & Munir, S. (2015). Educational inequality as a determinant of income inequality in South Asia. *South Asian Economic Journal*, 16(2), 235–250.
- Khadka, R. (2021). Barriers to schooling in the rural mountains of Nepal. *Nepal Public Policy Review*, 3(2), 75–92.
- Marx, K. (1848). *The communist manifesto*. Penguin Classics.
- Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. (2022). *Education Management Information System (EMIS) report 2022*. Government of Nepal.
- Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. (2023). *Higher education and provincial disparities in Nepal*. Government of Nepal.
- Ministry of Finance. (2023). *Provincial economic survey 2022/23*. Government of Nepal.
- Parsons, T. (1951). *The social system*. Free Press.
- Pherali, T. (2011). Education and conflict in Nepal: Possibilities for reconstruction. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 9(1), 135–154.
- Sen, A. (1999). *Development as freedom*. Oxford University Press.
- Subedi, B. (2022). Federalization and educational governance in Nepal: Opportunities and challenges. *Journal of Education and Development*, 5(2), 21–34.
- Tilak, J. B. G. (2015). *Education in South Asia: Transformations, challenges, and policy directions*. Oxford University Press.
- United Nations Development Programme. (2022). *Human development report: Nepal provincial profile*. United Nations Development Programme.
- United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. (2023). *Global education monitoring report 2023*. UNESCO Publishing.
- United Nations Children’s Fund. (2022). *Provincial education profile: Karnali Province*. United Nations Children’s Fund.