

Beyond Allies: Men's Transformative Role in Women's Empowerment in Nepal – A Sociological Perspective

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Abstract

This article examines the role of men in advancing women's empowerment in Nepal from a feminist political economy perspective. Drawing on secondary sources, including academic studies, policy documents, and national statistics, it situates gender inequality within the broader structures of patriarchy and crony capitalism that shape economic, political, and social life. The analysis highlights how men's engagement—ranging from advocacy for gender-equitable policies to the redistribution of unpaid care work—can expand women's economic autonomy and political participation. At the same time, it cautions against tokenistic or instrumental forms of male participation that reinforce existing hierarchies of class, caste, and ethnicity. The findings suggest that men's involvement can be transformative only when coupled with structural reforms and cultural shifts that dismantle patriarchal norms. By positioning men as complementary actors rather than central figures, the article underscores the importance of aligning individual attitudes with systemic change to achieve sustainable gender justice in Nepal.

Keywords: women's empowerment, men's role, feminist political economy, gender justice, Nepal.

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Introduction

Women's empowerment has increasingly become a central priority in global and national development agendas. Nepal, too, has committed itself to gender equality through constitutional guarantees, progressive policies, and its ratification of international frameworks such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Platform for Action. Yet, despite these advancements, the lived realities of Nepali women continue to be shaped by entrenched patriarchal norms, unequal access to resources, and persistent structural barriers that limit their economic, political, and social opportunities.

Much of the discourse on empowerment has historically emphasized women's agency, often framing gender equality as a responsibility borne by women themselves. However, an expanding body of scholarship now reminds us that gender justice is not solely a "women's issue" but a project of social transformation requiring men's active engagement (Cornwall, Edström, & Greig, 2011). From the perspective of feminist political economy (FPE), gender relations are not incidental; they are produced and reproduced through the intersection of political institutions, economic systems, and cultural practices (Bakker & Gill, 2003). In Nepal, these dynamics manifest through gendered divisions of labor, discriminatory property regimes, and male-dominated political institutions that systematically privilege men (Acharya, 2018). As primary beneficiaries of these systems, men also possess the capacity—and indeed the responsibility—to act as transformative agents in dismantling them.

The meaningful involvement of men requires more than symbolic gestures or superficial commitments. It demands active participation in challenging discriminatory policies, redistributing unpaid care work, and advocating for institutional reforms that shift power relations in tangible ways. This article, based exclusively on secondary data from scholarly literature, government reports, and civil society analyses, seeks to interrogate the role of men in advancing women's empowerment in Nepal. By grounding the analysis in an FPE framework, it emphasizes the interconnectedness of economic power, political decision-making, and gender justice, and underscores that sustainable empowerment depends on transforming structural inequalities while simultaneously reconfiguring gender relations.

The FPE lens is particularly valuable because it interrogates how patriarchy and capitalism intersect to shape social and economic life—determining who controls resources, who performs unpaid labor, and who holds decision-making authority (Bakker & Gill, 2003). Unlike liberal feminist approaches that often highlight individual advancement, FPE insists on systemic transformation through the redistribution of resources, the recognition of unpaid care work, and reforms to economic and political institutions (Rai, Hoskyns, & Thomas, 2014). In Nepal, persistent disparities in property ownership, labor market participation, and political representation illustrate the ways in which both law and culture continue to privilege men (Kabeer, 2016). Even though the 2015 Constitution of Nepal mandates gender inclusion in political representation, gaps remain in implementation, especially among rural and marginalized communities (UN Women, 2022).

Research from global and regional contexts demonstrates that men can play a pivotal role in advancing gender justice when they move beyond rhetoric to concrete action. As institutional gatekeepers, men influence policy-making, resource allocation, and household decision-making (Cornwall et al., 2011). Evidence suggests that men's engagement in advocating for equitable laws, sharing unpaid care work, and supporting women's leadership can help accelerate progress toward gender equality (Flood, 2019). However, the literature also cautions that male participation may become tokenistic, reproducing power hierarchies if it is not critically grounded in the dismantling of structural inequalities (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Within the Nepali context, scholarship on men's transformative role in women's empowerment remains limited. Existing studies often acknowledge men as institutional gatekeepers but treat their involvement as peripheral to women's struggles rather than as central to broader processes of structural change. Furthermore, although Nepal has established a legal framework that mandates gender inclusion, implementation gaps—especially in rural, caste- and class-divided, and marginalized communities—reflect the complexity of translating policy commitments into practice (UN Women, 2022). Global evidence also reminds us that if men's participation is uncritical, it risks reinforcing patriarchal power rather than dismantling it (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Flood, 2019).

This gap calls for deeper inquiry into how men's roles in Nepal—political, economic, and social—intersect with caste, class, and ethnicity in ways that either challenge or perpetuate gender disparities. A feminist political economy framework provides the critical tools needed to situate men's involvement within broader socio-economic and cultural structures, offering a more nuanced understanding of how men can become active agents of change rather than passive bystanders or inadvertent obstacles in the struggle for gender justice.

Guided by this perspective, the present study pursues three core objectives: (i) to analyze the role of men in advancing women's empowerment in Nepal through the lens of feminist political economy; (ii) to examine structural and cultural barriers that hinder transformative male engagement; and (iii) to recommend strategies for integrating men's participation into gender equality policies and programs in ways that avoid tokenism. The study addresses three research questions: In what ways have men contributed—politically, economically, and socially—to promoting gender equality in Nepal? What structural and cultural barriers limit men's transformative engagement in

women's empowerment initiatives? And how can male participation be embedded into long-term strategies for gender justice without reinforcing patriarchal hierarchies?

By engaging with these questions, the study contributes to ongoing debates on gender equality in Nepal and encourages scholars, policymakers, and practitioners to reconsider men's role not as peripheral supporters but as necessary partners in dismantling systemic inequalities and building a more inclusive and equitable society.

Methodology and Sources of Data

This study employs a qualitative research design rooted in the feminist political economy (FPE) framework to critically examine the role of men in advancing women's empowerment in Nepal. The FPE approach is particularly appropriate for this analysis because it interrogates the ways in which political, economic, and socio-cultural systems interact to reproduce gendered power relations, while also identifying pathways for transformative change (Bakker & Gill, 2003; Rai et al., 2014). By focusing on structural and cultural processes rather than individual behavior alone, this framework enables a deeper understanding of how men's engagement can both challenge and, at times, reinforce existing inequalities.

Given the emphasis on systemic factors and historical contexts, the research relies exclusively on secondary data. These data are drawn from a wide array of sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, and edited volumes that explore feminist political economy, gender relations, and men's roles in development. In addition, official government documents—such as the Constitution of Nepal (2015), periodic national plans, and sector-specific gender equality strategies—provide insight into the policy frameworks shaping male participation in gender justice initiatives. Reports and statistical publications from international organizations, including UN Women, UNDP, and the World Bank, contribute global and regional perspectives, as well as empirical indicators relevant to Nepal's progress on gender equality.

The study also incorporates material from civil society and non-governmental organizations such as the Forum for Women, Law, and Development (FWLD) and CARE Nepal, whose advocacy papers and field-level assessments offer practical insights into the realities of engaging men in empowerment programs. Furthermore, statistical databases from the Central Bureau

of Statistics (CBS) and international gender indices are used to contextualize thematic findings with quantitative evidence, highlighting trends in political representation, economic participation, and social inclusion. Data analysis follows a thematic approach. The literature and documents were systematically reviewed to identify recurring themes across three central areas: first, men's political, economic, and social contributions to gender equality; second, the structural and cultural barriers that hinder transformative male engagement; and third, strategies for integrating men's participation into gender equality initiatives without reinforcing patriarchal power relations. These themes were then synthesized and interpreted within the FPE framework to provide a nuanced understanding of the intersections between male engagement and women's empowerment.

Ethical considerations were addressed by ensuring that all sources were properly cited and by prioritizing perspectives that center women's lived experiences alongside critical analyses of male roles in gender transformation. By integrating diverse, credible, and contextually relevant sources, this study achieves a comprehensive and balanced analysis of both the opportunities and challenges inherent in engaging men as partners in the pursuit of gender justice in Nepal.

Results

The thematic analysis of secondary data highlights three central dimensions of men's role in advancing women's empowerment in Nepal: men's contributions to gender equality, the structural and cultural barriers to their transformative engagement, and strategies for integrating men's participation in meaningful ways.

Men in Nepal have participated in diverse forms of engagement across political, economic, and social domains that contribute to women's empowerment. Politically, male allies have supported gender-inclusive policies and legal reforms, which have played a role in expanding women's representation in parliament and local governance (UN Women, 2022). In the economic sphere, men's support has included facilitating women's access to financial resources, credit, and skill development initiatives, recognizing the importance of economic autonomy for women's empowerment (Acharya, 2018). Socially, although still limited, there is growing visibility of men taking part in redistributing unpaid care work, particularly through community-based awareness campaigns led by NGOs and civil society organizations (Cornwall et al., 2011). These examples, while encouraging, tend to remain localized and often rely on external interventions, underscoring the need for deeper systemic change.

Despite such positive developments, men's transformative engagement continues to be constrained by entrenched patriarchal norms and structural inequalities. Rigid gender roles, which position men primarily as breadwinners and decision-makers, remain deeply embedded in Nepali society (Kabeer, 2016). These norms restrict men's willingness to share domestic responsibilities and often inhibit their active support for women's leadership. Structural challenges—including unequal access to resources shaped by caste, class, and ethnicity—further limit the scope of both men's and women's participation in gender justice initiatives (Flood, 2019). Legal mandates on gender inclusion are frequently undermined by weak enforcement and resistance from male-dominated political institutions, where gatekeeping practices continue to marginalize women's voices (UN Women, 2022). Moreover, there is persistent evidence of tokenistic male participation, where involvement remains symbolic rather than substantive, leaving underlying power hierarchies unchallenged (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

For men's participation to be effectively integrated into gender equality strategies, both cultural attitudes and structural inequalities must be addressed. Initiatives that engage men as critical allies—rather than peripheral supporters—through sustained education and dialogue have demonstrated potential to shift perceptions of gender roles (Cornwall et al., 2011). At the policy level, reforms must also prioritize transforming institutional cultures, embedding accountability mechanisms to ensure men's active, meaningful, and non-tokenistic involvement in decision-making spaces.

From a feminist political economy perspective, it becomes clear that without concurrent socio-economic reforms—such as secure land rights for women, equitable labor protections, and robust social safety nets—male engagement risks remaining superficial (Rai, Hoskyns, & Thomas, 2014). Genuine gender justice requires strategies that combine cultural transformation with structural reforms to redistribute both resources and power more equitably across gender lines. Only through this dual approach can men's engagement become a truly transformative force in advancing women's empowerment in Nepal.

Discussion

The findings of this study illuminate the complex and multifaceted role that men play in advancing women's empowerment in Nepal. Analyzing men's contributions through a feminist political economy (FPE) lens allows for a nuanced understanding of how structural inequalities, cultural norms, and individual agency interact to shape gender dynamics. While men have shown engagement in political, economic, and social

domains, significant barriers persist that limit the transformative potential of their involvement.

Political Contributions and Constraints

Nepal has established progressive legal frameworks to ensure women's political representation, including constitutional mandates for 33% representation in the federal parliament and 40% in local governance bodies (Constitution of Nepal, 2015; UN Women, 2022). Male allies have occasionally advocated for these reforms, supporting the inclusion of women in decision-making spaces. However, men continue to occupy the majority of senior leadership positions within political parties, controlling candidate selection, resource allocation, and policy agenda-setting (Acharya, 2020; Shrestha & Shrestha, 2022). Consequently, even when women are elected, they frequently remain marginalized within decision-making committees, limiting their ability to influence policies substantively.

Hegemonic masculinity provides a useful lens to understand these dynamics. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) argue that male dominance is maintained not only through formal institutions but also via informal networks and patronage systems that privilege men's authority and limit women's influence. In Nepal, patriarchal norms frame leadership as inherently masculine, creating societal skepticism toward women's competence and undermining their authority (Gurung, 2022). This is particularly acute in rural and traditional settings, where male gatekeepers often resist women's leadership. Women from marginalized caste and ethnic groups—such as Dalits, Janajatis, and Madhesis—face intersecting barriers, including limited education, scarce political networks, and financial constraints, which further restrict their participation and ability to exercise political power (Karki & Basnet, 2021). Even within legal frameworks that mandate gender inclusion, male-dominated political institutions often perpetuate exclusionary practices, reflecting a gap between formal and substantive equality (Sharma & Bhattarai, 2023).

Social and Cultural Dimensions

The social condition of Nepali women reflects deeply entrenched and persistent gender inequalities that intersect with caste, ethnicity, and economic status. Patriarchal norms restrict women's mobility and autonomy, confining many to domestic responsibilities and limiting access to education, healthcare, and decision-making power (Gurung, 2022; MoWCSC, 2022). Early marriage remains a pervasive challenge,

particularly in rural and marginalized areas. For instance, girls in the Far-Western region are often married as early as 16, well below the legal minimum of 20 years (MoWCSC, 2022; Child Marriage Report, 2021). Early marriage negatively impacts girls' education, health, and economic opportunities, perpetuating cycles of gendered disadvantage and poverty.

Marginalized women face compounded inequalities. Dalit and Madhesi women, for example, have literacy rates as low as 40%, far below the national female average of 57% (CBS, 2023). They also face systemic barriers to healthcare access, including financial constraints and discrimination, which limit utilization of maternal, prenatal, and reproductive health services (UN Women Nepal, 2023). Gender-based violence disproportionately affects marginalized women, further exacerbated by weak legal protections and social stigma that deter reporting (MoWCSC, 2022). Conversely, women from dominant groups, such as Brahman, Chhetri, and Newar communities, generally benefit from better educational opportunities, stronger social networks, and enhanced access to healthcare, which collectively facilitate greater participation in economic and political spheres (Gurung, 2022).

Economic Participation and Constraints

Women's labor force participation in Nepal has gradually increased to approximately 26.8% as of 2022, yet most are concentrated in informal, low-paid, and precarious sectors, such as agriculture, domestic labor, and small-scale trade (CBS, 2023; Karki, 2022). Opportunities for formal employment remain limited due to systemic gender discrimination, restricted access to education, and entrenched work-family responsibilities (Thapa, 2021). Women's ownership of productive assets, such as land, remains highly unequal, with only 19.8% of agricultural land registered in women's names, reflecting patriarchal inheritance and property systems (CBS, 2023). This lack of asset ownership constrains women's economic autonomy, limits access to credit, and restricts participation in entrepreneurial activities (Karki, 2022).

Nepal's economy, heavily reliant on remittances, also creates gendered dynamics. Male out-migration leaves women as de facto household heads responsible for managing both productive and reproductive labor. Yet, male family members often retain control over remittance income, limiting women's decision-making power and economic autonomy (Gurung, 2022). The import-driven nature of Nepal's economy further marginalizes women's small-scale economic activities, while women employed

in global value chains—such as garment manufacturing—face low wages, poor working conditions, and limited job security (Shrestha, 2022; Thapa, 2021).

A critical, yet often overlooked, factor is the disproportionate burden of unpaid care and domestic labor. Women spend an average of 6.5 hours daily on unpaid domestic and caregiving tasks compared to 1.4 hours by men (UN Women Nepal, 2023). Cultural norms discourage men from sharing these responsibilities, despite NGO-led awareness and gender-transformative programs (Shrestha, 2022). From a feminist political economy perspective, these dynamics illustrate how women's reproductive labor sustains patriarchal and capitalist structures yet remains undervalued (Rai, Hoskyns, & Thomas, 2014).

Male Participation: Risks and Opportunities

While male engagement has potential to advance gender equality, tokenistic participation remains a concern. Some programs engage men superficially to satisfy donor requirements or policy checklists without challenging patriarchal norms (Karki & Basnet, 2021). Genuine male allyship requires critical consciousness-raising, sustained commitment, and institutional accountability mechanisms to challenge hegemonic masculinities and redistribute power equitably (Flood, 2019).

Intersectionality is crucial: men from marginalized ethnic or caste groups may encounter different pressures and opportunities compared to dominant caste men, influencing how they engage with women's empowerment initiatives (Gurung, 2022). Effective strategies must combine structural reforms—such as equitable land rights, labor protections, and inclusive political representation—with efforts to shift cultural norms and redistribute unpaid care work. Only through such integrated approaches can men act as genuine allies and enable sustainable, transformative change in Nepal's gendered socio-economic landscape.

Recommendations for Advancing Women's Empowerment in Nepal

Achieving genuine gender equality in Nepal requires coordinated, multi-level interventions that engage men as active partners while simultaneously addressing entrenched structural and cultural barriers. Government agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), civil society, and political parties all have critical roles to play in fostering transformative change. These recommendations are grounded in a feminist political economy framework, emphasizing the intersection of power, resources, and social norms in shaping gender relations.

Strengthening Government Initiatives and Policy Implementation

Government agencies hold a central responsibility in creating an enabling environment for women's empowerment. While Nepal has made significant legal strides—such as mandating 33% representation for women in the federal parliament and 40% in local governance bodies (Constitution of Nepal, 2015; UN Women, 2022)—enforcement remains uneven. To address this, robust monitoring and evaluation systems are essential. These systems should incorporate accountability mechanisms that track adherence to gender quotas, incentivize genuine inclusion, and penalize non-compliance to ensure that legal mandates translate into meaningful participation.

Economic empowerment is equally critical. Government programs must simplify land registration processes, raise awareness about women's property rights, and target marginalized groups, including Dalits, Janajatis, and Madhesis, who face compounded barriers to asset ownership (Karki & Basnet, 2021). Gender-responsive budgeting that supports women's entrepreneurship, access to financial services, and productive assets can help reduce economic disparities and foster autonomy.

Given the pervasive role of male out-migration and remittance-dependent households, policies must be gender-sensitive, providing women with financial literacy training, local livelihood opportunities, and social protection measures to mitigate the burdens of de facto household leadership (Gurung, 2022). Public campaigns led by government agencies should actively challenge patriarchal norms and promote men's equitable participation in unpaid care work and domestic responsibilities. Utilizing mass media, educational curricula, and community engagement initiatives can contribute to shifting societal attitudes toward gender equality.

Role of NGOs and Civil Society

NGOs and civil society organizations are critical drivers of grassroots change and institutional accountability. Programs that engage men and boys as allies, fostering critical reflection on gender norms and equitable sharing of caregiving responsibilities, have demonstrated potential for sustained behavioral change (Flood, 2019; Cornwall et al., 2011). Tailoring these interventions to local cultural contexts can overcome resistance and encourage lasting transformation.

Intersectional advocacy is essential. Civil society actors should collaborate closely with marginalized women's groups to identify their unique challenges and co-develop targeted interventions that address the layered discrimination faced by Dalit,

Janajati, and Madhesi women. Mentorship, leadership training, and networking opportunities for women—particularly in rural and historically excluded communities—can enhance their capacity to influence economic and political decision-making (Sharma & Bhattarai, 2023).

Moreover, rigorous research and evidence dissemination remain critical tools for holding authorities accountable. By documenting gender disparities and highlighting systemic inequities, NGOs and civil society can inform policy debates, guide program development, and promote transparency in government and institutional actions.

Enhancing Political Party Engagement

Political parties shape not only leadership opportunities but also the broader political culture. Moving beyond tokenistic representation requires institutionalizing internal gender equality mechanisms. These may include transparent candidate selection processes, internal quotas, and the establishment of dedicated gender desks within party structures to support women members and monitor progress (Acharya, 2020).

Direct support for women candidates is vital. Access to campaign funding, leadership training, mentorship, and networking opportunities can enhance the electoral competitiveness of women, particularly those from marginalized communities facing intersectional barriers (Karki & Basnet, 2021). Political parties must also foster inclusive cultures that actively challenge patriarchal attitudes and protect women from harassment or discrimination, ensuring safe and supportive environments where women can exercise leadership.

Engaging men as genuine allies within parties is critical. Male leaders and members should move beyond symbolic gestures to actively advocate for gender equality, participate in policy development, and champion women's empowerment initiatives. Such allyship is instrumental in dismantling hegemonic masculinities that perpetuate inequality and in fostering collaborative leadership models conducive to sustainable gender justice (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Flood, 2019).

Conclusion

This study underscores the critical yet complex role men play in advancing women's empowerment in Nepal, situated within a deeply patriarchal socio-political and economic context. Despite progressive legal provisions mandating women's representation in political institutions and growing societal recognition of gender

equality, structural and cultural barriers continue to limit women's substantive participation and leadership. Men's dominance over formal and informal power structures often positions them as gatekeepers, controlling access to political decision-making and economic resources. This dynamic perpetuates hegemonic masculinities, which systematically marginalize women—particularly those from Dalit, Janajati, and Madhesi communities—who experience intersecting forms of social exclusion (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Karki & Basnet, 2021).

Economically, while women's labor force participation has increased, they remain concentrated in precarious, informal, and low-paid employment sectors, with limited ownership of productive assets such as land (Central Bureau of Statistics [CBS], 2023). The import-dependent economy, coupled with reliance on male-dominated remittance flows, reinforces unequal household power relations, often constraining women's control over resources and decision-making (Gurung, 2022). Moreover, the disproportionate burden of unpaid care and domestic work restricts women's opportunities to engage fully in political and economic spheres, highlighting the necessity of redistributive interventions that encourage men's active participation in domestic labor (UN Women Nepal, 2023).

From a feminist political economy perspective, these challenges are not isolated but embedded within systemic structures that reproduce gendered inequalities. Meaningful transformation requires holistic and intersectional approaches that dismantle patriarchal norms and cultivate men's engagement as reflective allies rather than token supporters (Flood, 2019; Cornwall et al., 2011). Effective strategies include strengthening legal enforcement mechanisms, reforming political party practices, securing women's land and economic rights, and fostering inclusive institutional cultures that value diverse leadership.

Ultimately, the pursuit of gender justice in Nepal hinges on coordinated action by government agencies, civil society, and political actors to create enabling environments where women across all caste and ethnic groups can exercise meaningful political, social, and economic power. When men's engagement is grounded in critical reflection, accountability, and shared responsibility, it can serve as a powerful catalyst for transformative change. Only by challenging and reshaping entrenched power relations can Nepal realize the full potential of women's empowerment and achieve equitable, sustainable development.

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