



Crafting Inclusive and Resilient Nepal: Revisiting Sociological Imagination

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Abstract

Although Nepal has undergone major political transformations, the idea of an inclusive and federal “New Nepal” remains uneven in practice, as everyday institutions and social relations continue to reproduce exclusion. This paper explores how social inclusion, exclusion, and resilience are socially produced and experienced within Nepal’s changing socio-political landscape. It situates contemporary inequalities within long-standing structures of caste hierarchy, regional marginalization, and patriarchy, displaying how these intersect to shape the lived realities of Dalits, Madhesi, Adivasi Janajati, women, and youth. Relying on sociological perspectives, the paper conceptualizes exclusion as a relational and processual phenomenon embedded in power, while resilience is understood not simply as survival, but as the capacity for adaptation, negotiation, and transformation. Special attention is given to the uneven distribution of social capital and its implications for differential resilience across groups. Building on emerging forms of youth-led digital activism within the Generation Z movement, the analysis highlights how these platforms open new avenues for participation while simultaneously reproducing class-based inequalities in access and engagement. By revisiting C. Wright Mills’ sociological imagination, the paper connects personal experiences of marginalization to broader historical and structural forces, arguing that meaningful resilience in Nepal requires transforming entrenched power relations.

Keywords

social inclusion; social exclusion; resilience; sociological Imagination; generation Z movement

Introduction

Nepal's social fabric has historically been structured through layered inequalities driven by caste-based hierarchies, regional marginalization, and patriarchal norms. Four major groups - including Dalits, Madhesi (Terai communities), Indigenous communities (Adivasi Janajati), and women - have faced persistent marginalization from mainstream development and decision-making processes. As a result, these groups experienced political, socio-cultural, and economic forms of exclusion (Ghimire, 2018a).

Traditionally, the power structure in Nepal was closely aligned with the caste-based ideology of ritual purity and pollution, which defined status within the four-tiered varna (caste) system. The Muluki Ain (Legal Code) of 1854 formally codified caste hierarchy, which imposed legal discrimination. It also assigned Adivasi Janajati (Indigenous communities), a subordinate rank within the Hindu order (Hofer, 2004; Lawoti, 2012). Although Nepal officially abolished caste-based discrimination in 1963, exclusionary structures still prevail and continue to affect citizenship, land rights, and access to state power (Gurung, 2006).

The democratic restoration in 1990 empowered marginalized voices, yet political instability persisted. No elected government could complete a full term. For instance, between 1990 and 2006, 13 governments assumed office, reflecting the consistent fragility and instability of governance (Ghimire, 2018a; Firstpost, 2025). Ethnic tensions, inequalities, and unaddressed political demands ultimately fueled a decade-long civil war (1996–2006), which pressured the state into a new political settlement based on promises of inclusion and federal restructuring (Hangen, 2011; Drucza, 2016).

Following the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2006, Naya Nepal (New Nepal) emerged as an aspirational political slogan. It also signals a shift from a homogenizing Hindu nation-state toward a federal, pluralistic, and inclusive republic (Brown & Kaiser, 2017). Social inclusion has since become a core policy agenda aimed at redressing historical injustices based on caste, ethnicity, gender, religion, and geography (Drucza, 2016). Progress has been noteworthy, especially in women's political representation. The 1990 constitution mandated a 5 percent quota for women candidates, which was later expanded to 20 percent women's representation at the ward level during the 1997 local elections. The Constitution of Nepal 2015 further institutionalized women's participation by requiring that at least 33% of parliament seats must be held by women (Ghimire, 2018b; UN Women, 2020). Still, implementation gaps remain wide.

Despite major political transitions (from monarchy to democracy, from armed conflict to peace, and from unitary to federal governance), many socio-political barriers remain embedded in everyday social practices, networks, and institutions. For instance, Nepal continues to appear on the World Bank's Fragile and Conflict-Affected States list, and its peace trajectory has been frequently labeled unstable or stalled (Drucza, 2016; International Crisis Group, 2021). It also illustrates that deep-rooted socio-cultural inequalities persist, raising crucial sociological questions about the lived realities and everyday experiences of social exclusion. These experiences of enduring exclusions shape how individuals and communities respond to shocks, risks, and socio-economic transformations.

Although ethnicized, caste-based, regional, and gendered inequality in Nepal has deep historical roots (Hangen, 2011), social movements continue to challenge the dominance of hill high-caste elites (Rawal, 2008). Nepal's Gen Z, particularly visible during the youth-led protests of September 2025, has instigated confronting political stagnation, unemployment, corruption, elite dominance (popularly termed "Nepokids"), and generational inequality in opportunities and aspirations. Their activism indicates a move toward digital civic engagement that eventually challenged existing power structures and demanded meaningful participation in governance. Yet, this emerging digital activism, predominantly driven by urban and educated youth, also risks new exclusions by privileging class-based access to technology and public discourse (Chand et al. 2024), leaving rural and marginalized voices less represented (Baniya, 2022).

Scholars increasingly apply resilience theory to social systems to evaluate not just survival under stress, but the capacity to reorganize, transform, and claim agency (Walker et al., 2004; Lockie, 2016; Cinner et al., 2019). In Nepal, this is particularly salient following the earthquakes, the COVID-19 pandemic, rapid urbanization, ongoing struggles for federal inclusion, and the Gen Z movement. Understanding resilience in this context requires examining power relations: who gets to be resilient, and at what cost? The pursuit of inclusion and resilience, therefore, remains central to Nepal's sociopolitical transformation. Along with academic endeavor, the Sustainable Development Goals (UNDEC, 2015) position inclusion and resilience as fundamental to peace, equity, and sustainability. Nepal's sociological challenges, therefore, extend beyond institutions and policy designs. It requires a powerful question: Who belongs? Who decides? How do we build a society where everyone can thrive together?

In seeking an answer, revisiting C. Wright Mills' sociological imagination (Mills, 1959) is essential for connecting the personal struggles of marginalized groups with broader historical and structural forces shaping Nepal's socio-political landscape. By doing so,

it contributes to conceptualizing resilience as a pathway to social justice. This paper is structured as follows: The next section discusses the conceptual link between social inclusion, exclusion, and resilience. It then examines Nepal's historical and post-conflict context to show how exclusion operates across caste, gender, age groups, and region. The following sections analyze ongoing policy challenges and measurement gaps, before applying Mills' (1959) sociological imagination to argue that inclusive resilience requires transforming power relations in Nepal's social structure.

Social Inclusion and Resilience: Conceptual Issues

As concepts, *social inclusion* and *social exclusion* do not have universally accepted definitions, yet they are widely used in policy and academic debates on deprivation and inequality (De Haan, 1997, 1998; Silver, 2015). Across most interpretations, social exclusion refers to *restricted participation in society* (Levitas et al., 2007; Popay et al., 2010). It signifies both a state in which individuals are denied full or partial participation in economic, social, political, and cultural life, and a process in which power, discrimination, and institutional structures sustain unequal access to resources and rights (De Haan, 1999; Shrestha, 2022).

Popay (2010) conceptualizes exclusion as a dynamic, relational, and multidimensional phenomenon (Gore & Figueiredo, 1997; Beall & Piron, 2005) produced through unequal power relations across economic, political, social, and cultural domains at multiple scales. Similarly, Levitas et al. (2007) emphasize the denial of rights, resources, and participation necessary for a "normal" standard of living. Exclusion is thus relational and structural, manifesting through repeated social interactions in which certain groups are denied access to valued opportunities (Gore & Figueiredo, 1997). Such exclusion may be overt and intentional, or subtle and unintended, yet it is often rooted in discriminatory power relations (De Haan, 1999; Beall & Piron, 2005).

Early origins of the concept lie in Durkheimian functionalist concerns about social order during transitions to industrial society (O'Brien & Penna, 2008; Rawal, 2008). Contemporary scholars identify several dimensions, including exclusion from citizenship rights, labor markets, civic participation, and social networks (Aasland & Fløtten, 2000). Importantly, multiple forms of exclusion may occur simultaneously, compounding vulnerability (Kabeer, 2000; Shrestha, 2022).

On the contrary, social inclusion refers to improving rights, opportunities, and participation for disadvantaged groups. Yet, achieving inclusion is complex because there is no shared set of criteria or consensus on what conditions constitute full inclusion (Allan, 2003, as cited in Drucza, 2016). Moreover, inclusion and exclusion are interconnected: strengthening a cohesive group identity may simultaneously

reproduce boundaries against others. Exclusion is therefore not always negative; under some conditions, distance from oppressive social relations can be protective (Francis, 2000). Social exclusion is context-dependent in at least three ways: i) Norms of inclusion vary across societies and regions; ii) historical and institutional differences shape who is excluded and how; and iii) place and geography influence access to services and opportunities (Silver, 2015). Thus, exclusion and inclusion are spatially uneven, often structured by wider political and economic processes.

Although the preceding discussion centers on exclusion and inclusion, it has direct implications for resilience. Resilience refers to a society's capacity to withstand, adapt, and recover from crises when conflict, economic shocks, climate hazards, or political instability are evident (World Bank, 2013). Those facing multiple, intersecting exclusions often develop coping strategies and community solidarity to navigate structural barriers, forms of everyday resilience. Recent resilience research has therefore increasingly adopted exclusion as a critical analytical lens, recognizing that the ability to withstand shocks and crises depends heavily on equitable access to resources, institutions, and rights.

Social Inclusion and Resilience in Nepal

Historically, Nepal's social structure has been shaped by Hindu caste hierarchy, deep regional disparities, and patriarchal norms, producing persistent patterns of exclusion across multiple groups (Rawal, 2008; Lawoti, 2010; Shrestha, 2022). Social exclusion operates not as a single barrier but through overlapping and intersectional processes in which social identity, geography, gender, and class collectively determine who has access to public services, livelihood opportunities, and political influence (Silver, 1995; De Haan, 1999).

These exclusions manifest across spheres of life (See Table 1). Dalits are restricted from accessing institutions due to caste and ritual hierarchy, whereas Madhesis struggle for recognition because they suffer from regional and linguistic marginalization. Similarly, indigenous identities are subordinated to a Hindu national identity, a process that reflects what Bourdieu (1991) terms symbolic domination - the imposition of cultural meanings by those in power, which legitimizes hierarchy and subordination. Like many other South Asian countries, Nepalese women have limited agency shaped by patriarchy despite constitutional protections. Finally, young people face economic precarity and political alienation, which leads to their disconnection from governance. Notably, inclusion and exclusion are structurally linked, and experiences vary within groups; not all members of marginalized categories are equally deprived (Francis, 2000). Empirical studies illustrate these internal hierarchies, such as Parbate Dalits being linguistically included yet economically and politically excluded, whereas

Newars and Thakalis are culturally marginalized in certain areas but historically advantaged in access to state resources (Pandey et al., 2006; Pradhan, 2006). Thus, analyses of Nepal's social structure should account for both identity categories and intra-group diversity and intersectionality. These scenarios demonstrate that exclusion is not accidental but deeply embedded in social institutions and identity (Ghimire, 2018a).

Table 1

Social Exclusion in Nepal

Caste/Ethnic Groups	Key processes of exclusion
Dalits	Caste hierarchy, untouchability, economic precarity (Gurung & Pradhan, 2020; Shrestha, 2022)
Madhesis	Regional marginalization, linguistic discrimination, contested citizenship (Lawoti, 2010)
Indigenous Peoples (Adivasi Janajati)	Cultural domination, limited political representation (Bhattachan et al, 2003, Shrestha, 2022)
Women	Patriarchy, gender-based discrimination, and limited mobility (Kabeer, 2000; World Bank & DFID, 2006)
Gen Z / Youth	Unemployment, corruption, exclusion from political decision-making (Koirala, 2025; The Guardian, 2025)

Following the 2006 peace process and the Constitution of Nepal (2015), inclusion became a formal state agenda, which includes federal restructuring, affirmative action, reservation quotas, and proportional representation in state bodies. These policies target Dalits, Indigenous communities (Adivasi Janajati), Madhesis, Muslims, women, and other marginalized communities (Rawal, 2008; Shrestha, 2022). However, implementation is uneven and politically contested. For instance, affirmative action is captured by the elites when quotas benefit powerful individuals rather than disadvantaged populations (Shrestha, 2022). Similarly, patronage politics and “aafno manche culture” still dominate public institutions (Lawoti, 2010). Debates persist between meritocratic arguments and historical justice approaches. Researchers contend that temporary, targeted affirmative action is needed until marginalized groups can compete on an equal footing (Shrestha, 2022).

In Nepal, there exists a close linkage between resilience and social capital. Social capital encompasses networks of trust and reciprocity that enable communities to mobilize resources and support. Research has shown that bonding social capital-relationships within communities and bridging social capital-connections between communities are generally strong and help in facilitating collective actions in crises such as floods and earthquakes. However, the link between social capital, which

connects communities to external institutions and decision-makers, is generally weak. Weak social capital linking marginalized groups means they have fewer institutional connections and struggle to access external resources, aid, and formal recovery processes, which undermines resilient outcomes. Existing social hierarchies, gender inequalities, and geographic remoteness further shape the distribution and experience of social capital and resilience across Nepal's various groups. It thus becomes important to strengthen inclusive governance and institutional links to enhance resilience in an equitable manner across diverse Nepalese communities (Gyawali et al., 2020; Panday et al., 2021). Institutional linkages serve as essential channels for the creation and mobilization of social capital, while existing social capital, in turn, strengthens, legitimizes, and sustains institutional arrangements.

Social media outreach capital becomes crucial for people, along with conventional forms of social capital, especially for Gen Z. This digital form of capital includes all those networks, trust, and reciprocity developed by active use of social media platforms that allow the young generation to mobilize support and share critical information quickly in case of any crisis. Given the high social media usage in Nepal, especially among youth, platforms like Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram serve as vital bridges, connecting communities and building awareness, preparedness, and the necessary efforts (Dahal, 2021; Lamichhane, 2023).

Before the government-imposed ban on a large number of social media platforms, including Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram, on September 4, 2025, social media had enabled the young protesters of Nepal to coordinate and share protest details, safety tips, and peaceful demonstration advice via channels on platforms such as Instagram and Discord. The ban was perceived as a form of censorship and the silencing of dissent, triggering offline mass protests, predominantly a youth-driven movement that later contributed to the resignation of the Prime Minister and the formation of an interim government (Koirala, 2025). However, at the same time, digital misinformation, unequal access to the internet, and weak regulation of online spaces might weaken the positive contributions of social media platforms.

Improving digital literacy and ensuring more inclusive online participation would strengthen Gen Z's social media capital, foster stronger collective action, and bridge gaps with external institutions. Thus, integrating social media capital into existing frameworks is essential to equitably reinforce resilience in Nepal's evolving social and political landscape.

Post-Conflict Transformation and Limits of Inclusion

Nepal's post-conflict transformation has been marked by persistent demands for inclusion from groups that have long been marginalized by the state. Multiple vectors of exclusion based on caste, gender, geography, language, education, class, religion, and ethnicity intersect to produce enduring inequalities, vulnerability, and poverty (Drucza, 2016). The inclusion agenda formally entered state policy through the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP/Tenth Plan) in 2003, positioning inclusion as a national development priority (Rawal, 2008). Since then, debates on state restructuring, federalism, and proportional representation have become central to Nepal's political discourse. The 2006 Jana Andolan II further intensified claims over cultural, territorial, and linguistic rights, with Indigenous communities (Adivasi Janajati), Madhesis, and Dalits openly challenging what they perceive as the historical dominance of Parbatiya high-caste elites in political and administrative spheres (Rawal, 2008). Ethnic mobilization, in particular, has critiqued the legacy of "Hinduization," the homogenizing nation-building project that relegated diverse identities to subordination (Rawal, 2008).

Historical data underscores that while Nepal achieved territorial integration, the state showed limited success in institutionally recognizing or accommodating the cultural and political aspirations of the Tarai population (Gaige, 1975). Contemporary analyses caution, however, against reducing inequality to a simple binary of privileged Brahmin-Chhetri versus marginalized others. Social exclusion is uneven within groups and varies by class, locality, and political access (Pandey et al., 2006). Yet dominant caste privilege continues to manifest through what Bista (1992) termed *Bahunbad*, a system where cultural norms and state resources align to sustain upper-caste advantages. Therefore, Nepal's challenge in the post-conflict era is not merely to create an inclusive political settlement but to transform deeply embedded social hierarchies that hinder resilience. And so, without addressing intersecting exclusions, the promise of federalism risks reinforcing old inequalities under new institutional arrangements.

Challenges in Conceptualizing and Measuring Social Inclusion and Resilience in Nepal

Conceptualizing and measuring social exclusion and resilience remain complex in Nepal due to the multidimensional and relational nature of exclusion. Determining *who* is being left behind is not straightforward, as exclusion varies across caste, gender, ethnicity, geography, class, and other intersecting identities (Drucza, 2016). While the Sustainable Development Goals emphasize monitoring at the national level, many exclusion dynamics operate locally and remain invisible within aggregated statistics (Ghimire, 2018a). Objective indicators, such as poverty thresholds, service access, and representation, etc., often fail to capture the subjective experiences of

discrimination, stigma, and human dignity. This generates tenacious gaps between theoretical frameworks and empirical measurement, as well as between personal experiences and collective perceptions of exclusion.

Quantifying exclusion also demands clear criteria for assessing who is excluded and how, yet these criteria differ across communities, regions, and political discourses (Saith, 2001). Saith (2001) further argues that attempts to apply the concept of social exclusion to developing countries have often resulted in merely “relabeling” existing poverty studies rather than recognizing the structural and historical processes underpinning marginalization (as cited in Ghimire, 2018a: 51). This paper/discussion echoes Saith’s (2001) caution against importing Global North frameworks and situates exclusion within Nepal’s histories of caste, region, and patriarchy. Moreover, resilience cannot be meaningfully achieved in societies where unequal power relations block access to social protection, rights, and institutions. In Nepal, caste-based hierarchies and entrenched inequalities continue to influence who benefits from state interventions, even as post-conflict *Naya Nepal* aspires to construct an inclusive and resilient society (Drucza, 2016). Therefore, advancing inclusive resilience requires methodological approaches that are both context-sensitive and capable of capturing the structural and intersectional drivers of exclusion.

Sociological Imagination, Social Inclusion, and Resilient Nepal

Building an inclusive and resilient Nepal is not merely a development agenda but a sociological imperative. According to Mills’ (1959) concept of the *sociological imagination*, individuals’ choices—such as where they live, the work they do, and how they use resources—cannot be understood in isolation from the broader social structures and historical forces that shape their lives (Mills, 1959: 3–6). It urges us to connect private troubles with public issues, enabling us to recognize how individual suffering, such as caste-based discrimination, gender inequality, or regional deprivation, reflects larger structural forces. Through this lens, exclusion is not the result of individual failure but a systemic outcome embedded in social hierarchies, dominant ideologies, and institutional arrangements. Understanding exclusion sociologically shifts the focus from personal adaptation to social transformation, which ensures that claims for dignity, representation, and justice become central to resilience-building.

This insight aligns with classical sociological efforts to explain how societies maintain cohesion and confront inequality. Classical sociological theory highlights both the potential and limitations of existing frameworks in addressing exclusion. Functionalists like Durkheim (1933) recognized the need for social cohesion and moral integration, arguing that solidarity sustains the resilience of societies. Parsons’ (1951) structural-

functionalism similarly emphasized institutional stability but often overlooked power imbalances and marginalized voices. These perspectives help explain *why* societies seek order through stable institutions that fulfill key functions and promote shared values to maintain cohesion, but provide little guidance on challenging entrenched caste domination, patriarchal norms, or regional marginalization in Nepal. In contrast, conflict theorists - drawing from Marx- foreground inequality and contestation, reminding us that resilient societies emerge through struggles over resources, rights, and recognition (Collins, 1994; Lawoti, 2010).

The sociological imagination bridges these theoretical divides by foregrounding agency, structure, and consciousness simultaneously. It calls for a reflexive understanding of how social exclusion weakens collective resilience by eroding trust, limiting participation, and concentrating power within elite networks. As Nepal reconstructs its political institutions through federalism, affirmative action, and public accountability, sociological imagination helps ensure that reforms respond to *lived realities* by enabling policymakers and citizens to connect individual experiences with broader social structures and historical contexts rather than abstract policy models. Thus, applying sociological imagination is essential for reimagining Nepal as a society where diversity strengthens resilience and where no community is left behind.

Concluding Remarks

Resilience built on unequal foundations is fragile and selective. A fragmented society—divided by caste, class, gender, region, or generation—struggles to mobilize resources equitably or respond collectively during crises. Therefore, inclusion is not an optional policy add-on but a structural precondition for social resilience. Relying on Mills’ (1959) sociological imagination, we must connect everyday suffering, such as untouchability, unemployment, or linguistic marginalization, to broader power structures that sustain exclusion. Functionalist perspectives remind us of the need for social cohesion, while conflict theorists highlight contestations over resources and recognition (Rawal, 2008). A Sociological reading thus exposes how institutions reproduce inequality, how “othering” shape’s identity boundaries, and why inclusion efforts must reflect the lived experiences of those who are marginalized—not simply top-down state interpretations.

This discussion has shown that social exclusion in Nepal is both institutional and experiential. It is codified through caste hierarchy, patronage networks, and uneven federal arrangements, and enacted through everyday practices of othering (Drucza, 2016). Global frameworks on social exclusion and resilience offer useful language; yet, as Saith (2001) cautions, frameworks developed in welfare-oriented Global North contexts cannot be mechanically transposed into developing countries

without risking a reduction to traditional poverty metrics. The post-conflict federal restructuring and affirmative action policies signal meaningful progress, but they have also become contested political terrains. The gap between *political settlement* (elite bargains) and *social contract* (shared rights and dignity) persists, producing a state that remains fragmented and exclusionary despite constitutional commitments to equality.

Nepal's journey toward an inclusive and resilient future is therefore ongoing and deeply contested. An inclusive and resilient Nepal requires more than technical policy fixes. Policies alone cannot dismantle casteism, patriarchy, or regional bias—nor can they address emerging vulnerabilities faced by youth experiencing digital-era precarity, corruption, and disillusionment. As global agendas such as the SDGs acknowledge, no universal model can fully capture context-specific forms of exclusion or prescribe a single pathway to inclusion (United Nations, 2016). It therefore requires transforming social relations, redistributing power, and addressing exclusion as a dynamic and intersectional process. True resilience can only be built through collective empowerment, recognition of identities, and inclusive social contracts.

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