



Shifting Gender Norms and Women's Empowerment in Rural Nepal

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Abstract

Gender construction is a contextual phenomenon that differs across cultural belief systems. This study assesses gender construction and its influence on the life prospects of women in rural Nepal. Utilizing a cross-sectional survey design, data were collected from 132 sample households residing in 12 different settlements across two wards of the Gurans Rural Municipality in Dailekh. The study found that gender construction is becoming more anti-patriarchal and gender-friendly in the study area, positively impacting the life prospects of women in rural Nepal. Gender-sensitive policies, gender-responsive budgets, quality parenting for educational access, and the effective role of the media are identified as major factors contributing to changing gender constructions. Additionally, indicators such as caste and ethnicity, family socioeconomic status, and family support systems also play vital roles in gender constructions. The evolving belief system regarding gender constructions is motivating women to assume socio-economic roles in their families and communities, leading to socio-economic and political empowerment and a reduction in gender-based violence. These improvements are possible due to the implementation of international and national policy instruments related to gender equality and women's empowerment. This study is useful for policy debates on enhancing women's empowerment and reducing gender-based inequalities in rural Nepal.

Keywords: gender construction, influencing factors, life prospect, women empowerment

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1. Introduction

Gender encompasses culturally constructed roles, behaviors, expressions, and relationships that societies attribute to men, women, boys, and girls (Deborah & Puzio, 2019). These norms govern interpersonal dynamics and dictate the expected behaviors, responsibilities, and identities associated with different genders across cultures. Importantly, gender is distinct from biological sex, as it represents a fluid spectrum that allows individuals to develop their potential free from restrictive stereotypes. Gender equality refers to the fair and equitable treatment of all genders, ensuring equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities regardless of gender identity (Camilletti, 2024). This principle recognizes both the similarities and differences between genders while working to eliminate discriminatory barriers. As a fundamental human right, gender equality serves as both a prerequisite for and a measure of sustainable, human-focused development. Within domestic spheres, achieving gender equality proves particularly vital for enhancing women's and children's well-being and economic participation (Dilli, 2018). When properly implemented, gender equality guarantees balanced access to economic resources, social services, cultural participation, and political representation across all genders (United Nations Children's Fund, 2017).

However, persistent cultural frameworks, norms, and values often perpetuate gender disparities (Kagesten, 2016), creating significant obstacles to human progress. The Gender Inequality Index (GII) represents a significant global challenge (United Nations Development Programme, 2025). Across many societies, men continue to dominate higher-ranking positions in social, economic, and political spheres. Research demonstrates that economic prosperity correlates strongly with women's decision-making autonomy (Syed, 2009), underscoring how women's empowerment serves as a fundamental requirement for national and societal progress. The concept of empowerment encompasses various dimensions, including self-determination, personal agency, autonomy, choice, rights assertion, independence, and freedom in decision-making (Mandal, 2013). Achieving gender-balanced participation in governance represents a crucial objective for strengthening democratic systems and ensuring their effective operation (United Nations, 2005).

Gender inclusion starts at home, then spreads to the community and the whole country. The household serves as the primary economic unit that provides for the subsistence and socio-economic progress of its members (Mokomane, 2012). Decision-making within households involves complex negotiations between members and requires balancing income-generating activities with domestic production for self-consumption (Omari, 1995; Wheelock & Oughton, 1996). This structure creates a supportive environment that helps women grow and live with dignity as equal citizens. Improving women's educational attainment plays a pivotal role in strengthening their decision-making capacity. Access to material resources and employment opportunities is closely linked to enhanced autonomy in household decisions. Economic independence gained through

earned income enables women to reduce reliance on male family members and increases their bargaining power in domestic negotiations (Dilli, 2018). In this social and economic context, traditional constructions of gender continue to shape both social status and economic participation, making it a researchable issue.

2. Religion, Culture, and Gender Perspective

Gender constructs and their impact on women's opportunities remain context-dependent and complex. Religious doctrines often reinforce gender hierarchies — Christianity's depiction of God as Father implies male supremacy, while Islam traditionally restricts women's public participation by prohibiting mosque attendance for prayers, outdoor employment, and requiring face coverings with the burqa. Within Hinduism, though not doctrinally codified, prevalent Brahmanical beliefs suggest male Brahmin birth results from virtuous past lives (Channa, 2013), implicitly establishing male superiority, further evidenced by menstrual worship restrictions. Many societies typically associate femininity with caregiving roles, confining women predominantly to domestic spheres, while masculinity is equated with leadership and economic provision (Sharma et al., 2016). These gendered divisions stem not merely from behavioral expectations but are sustained through economic structures, cultural traditions, and intergenerational value transmission. Institutional frameworks, including cultural norms, social systems, and political structures, collectively shape gender formations, relationships, and associated power differentials (United Nations, 2012).

Nepal's patriarchal social structure systematically privileges men through socio-cultural norms that reinforce male dominance in economic and political spheres. Census data reveals stark gender disparities, with only 23.8 percent of Nepalese women owning land (National Statistics Office, 2022), despite constitutional guarantees of equal property rights. The labor market shows significant imbalance — while women constitute 55.5 percent of the working-age population, their employment rate stands at just 22 percent (Shrestha, 2019), indicating substantial barriers to workforce participation. Political representation remains critically low, with women comprising over half the population but occupying minimal decision-making positions. Historical patterns show persistent underrepresentation, evidenced by only 12 percent female candidacy in the 1999 elections (Pardhan, 2005). This exclusion persists despite Nepal's ratification of international gender equality commitments. The gap between legal provisions and ground realities is particularly evident in property rights implementation and educational access, where women continue to occupy subordinate positions with limited autonomy in household decisions (Pokharel, 2008). These systemic inequalities demonstrate how deeply entrenched patriarchal structures undermine formal equality measures.

The Hindu patriarchal system also remains firmly established through socio-cultural and religious traditions. Transforming gender constructs necessitates fundamental changes

to long-standing rituals and cultural practices. Both international and national policies, along with advocacy efforts, play a crucial role in redefining and reshaping traditional gender roles. Notably, men's participation and support are essential for driving societal transformation (Adhikari, 2022). Recent years have witnessed significant shifts in women's decision-making authority, particularly among older women, Buddhist women, educated women, and professional women who demonstrate greater influence in household matters (Tiwari, 2013). Younger, educated women increasingly manage household finances, enjoy greater spending autonomy, and experience enhanced social standing, though some still rely on their husbands for major decisions (Balayar, 2021). The growing trend of male migration for foreign employment has further altered gender dynamics, with women assuming household leadership roles and making economic decisions regarding daily expenditures (Rajkarnikar, 2020). Against these evolving backdrops, this study seeks to examine gender constructions and their impact on women's life opportunities in Gurans Rural Municipality of Dailekh, Karnali Province.

3. Policy Perspectives

Gender equality entered international human rights law through the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). In 1975, the UN General Assembly proclaimed International Women's Year, which was succeeded by the UN Decade for Women from 1976–1985. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) was formally adopted in 1979. Multiple global observances promote gender equality: International Women's Day (March 8), International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation (February 6), International Day of Women and Girls in Science (February 11), International Day for Eliminating Sexual Violence in Conflict (June 19), International Widows' Day (June 23), International Day of the Girl Child (October 11), and International Day for Rural Women (October 15).

Likewise, Nepal initiated gender equality measures through its sixth five-year plan (1981–1985). The 2015 Constitution guarantees non-discrimination and equal ancestral property rights for women, though implementation remains inconsistent. Legal frameworks like the National Civil Code (2017) and Civil Service Act (2010) establish quotas — reserving 33 percent of civil service positions for women alongside other marginalized groups. The Local Self-Governance Act (2017) mandates women's representation in local governance, while election rules require 50 percent female candidates for key positions (Ministry of Federal Affairs and Local Development, 2021). The interim plan (2008–2011) introduced 33 percent reservations across government structures and promoted gender-responsive budgeting. The 2020 Fifteenth periodic plan continues prioritizing local-level gender equality (Dulal, 2020). However, constitutional provisions in Nepal (Article 11[5], [7]) restrict women's ability to confer citizenship (Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs, 2015).

Thus, despite substantial constitutional guarantees, policy commitments, and evolving socio-cultural dynamics, a persistent gap remains between formal provisions for gender equality and the lived realities of women in Nepal. Existing studies largely focus on national-level trends or urban contexts, leaving rural areas like Gurans Rural Municipality underexplored. Limited research examines how intersecting factors such as religion, cultural traditions, migration patterns, and policy implementation gaps shape women's life opportunities in these settings, highlighting the need for localized, context-specific analysis.

4. Methodology: Study Area

Gurans Rural Municipality is located in the Dailekh District of Karnali Province, Nepal. Twelve settlements—six from each ward—were purposively selected from two wards (core and periphery) of Gurans Rural Municipality to constitute the study area. The municipality has a total population of 22,033 (10,675 males and 11,358 females) distributed across 4,096 households. Ward number seven has a population of 2,316 (1,168 males and 1,148 females) with 387 households, while ward number eight has a population of 2,337 (1,174 males and 1,163 females) with 383 households (Gurans Rural Municipality [GRM], 2019).

This rural municipality is characterized by low development indicators, including in gender construction and women's empowerment. However, it is located in close proximity to Surkhet, the capital city of Karnali Province. Geographically, it borders Kalikot District to the north, Birendranagar Municipality of Surkhet District to the south, Achham District of Sudur Paschim Province to the west, and Jajarkot District to the east. The study area is culturally diverse, with villagers practicing Kalikote, Surkheti, Achhami, Jajarkote, and Dailekhi cultural traditions. Many of these practices are evolving under the influence of modernization, as evidenced by increased girls' enrollment in education and higher levels of women's empowerment. Nevertheless, the persistence of *Chhaupadi pratha*—a cultural practice in which menstruating girls and women are secluded in cowsheds—remains a challenge. This study, therefore, aims to assess gender construction and its impact in this rural municipality.

5. Methods and Materials

The study adopts both quantitative and qualitative approaches (Creswell, 2013) to collect the required data and information. Quantitative data were obtained through a cross-sectional survey design from 132 sample households (67 from Ward 7 and 65 from Ward 8), selected using purposive and random sampling. Survey research was chosen for its effectiveness in collecting valid and objective data from a large audience (McCombes, 2022; Wolff, 2015). Data collection employed self-administered household survey questionnaires (Ponto, 2015).

In addition, qualitative data were gathered through nine in-depth interviews with articulate women participants, using a narrative inquiry design. An interview guideline was used to explore their stories and experiences related to the research issues (Cohen et al., 2018). Data analysis involved the use of simple Likert scale tabulation and descriptive methods. The following section presents findings on: characteristics of the respondents, attributes towards gender equality, factors for gender construction, and life prospects of women.

6. Results

6.1 Characteristics of the Respondents

The study's respondents comprised both male and female individuals, with 55 percent being male and 45 percent female. The largest proportion (26 percent) were aged between 20 and 40 years, while the smallest group (14 percent) were aged above 60 years. Caste-wise, 75 percent of respondents belonged to the Chhetri community, followed by Dalit (12 percent), Janajati (11 percent), and Brahmin (2 percent).

Regarding land ownership, most respondents (26 percent) possessed 6–9 *ropani* of irrigated land, while the smallest proportion (8 percent) owned ≥ 10 *ropani* of irrigated land. Similarly, 42 percent owned 6–9 *ropani* of rain-fed land, and 44 percent owned ≥ 10 *ropani* of rain-fed land. More than half of the respondents (52 percent) did not own irrigated farmland, while 6 percent did not own rain-fed land.

In terms of occupation, 32 percent of respondents' family members were engaged in agriculture, followed by business (23 percent), government jobs (20 percent), foreign employment (17 percent), and private jobs (9 percent).

In terms of income, 79 percent of respondents earned \leq Rs. 100,000 monthly, 20 percent earned Rs. 100,000–199,000, and only 1 percent earned Rs. 200,000–299,000. Most families fell within the low-to-middle income range, with 38 percent spending Rs. 10,000–20,000 monthly, 45 percent spending Rs. 20,000–30,000, and 14 percent spending Rs. 30,000–40,000. Despite the absence of private schools, most families allocated resources for education and healthcare, relying on surplus agricultural production. Additionally, 80 percent of respondents reported that female family members participated in cooperatives and other social organizations.

6.2 Attitudes towards Gender Equality

The study developed 15 items to assess respondents' beliefs regarding gender construction. The majority expressed favorable attitudes toward gender equality (Table 1). For example, 80 percent disagreed with the statement "*Women should not engage in business or any economic activity.*" Similarly, 78 percent disagreed with the statement "*Women should not engage in social and political activity*" and 70 percent disagreed

with “*Women should not own any property.*” However, 1 percent strongly agreed with the latter statement, which is not conducive to women’s empowerment.

Traditional gender roles continue to be internalized. For instance, Solbes-Canales et al. (2020) found similar attitudes among students in public schools. Conversely, statements such as “*Women are the backbone of society*” and “*Men and women should equally engage in household chores and childcare*” received 28 percent and 20 percent “strongly agree” responses, respectively.

Previous studies support these findings. Doss (1996) and Mader (2015) found significant decision-making power for women in household expenditure and economic matters. Likewise, Luchok et al. (1987) reported variations in women’s roles based on cultural background, with Hindu women primarily engaged in domestic and subsistence production, while Tibeto-Burman women were more involved in market activities.

Table 1. *Attitude towards Gender Equality* (n=132)

| Items | SA (%) | Agree (%) | Nutral (%) | Disagree (%) | SD (%) |
|---|-----------|--------------|---------------|-----------------|-----------|
| Men are superior than women | 0.00 | 26.00 | 5.00 | 61.00 | 8.00 |
| Women are kindhearted | 7.00 | 67.00 | 3.00 | 23.00 | 0.00 |
| Women maintain daily household chores | 0.00 | 33.00 | 0.00 | 56.00 | 11.00 |
| Women take care of the children | 0.00 | 36.00 | 1.00 | 52.00 | 11.00 |
| Women are power of society | 28.00 | 64.00 | 4.00 | 4.00 | 0.00 |
| Men play economic role in their family | 0.00 | 42.00 | 2.00 | 51.00 | 5.00 |
| Men are decision makers of their family | 0.00 | 22.00 | 0.00 | 62.00 | 16.00 |
| Women should not provide property right | 0.00 | 13.00 | 2.00 | 70.00 | 16.00 |
| Women should not involve in economic activities | 0.00 | 3.00 | 1.00 | 80.00 | 17.00 |
| Women should not involve in social and political activities | 1.00 | 2.00 | 4.00 | 78.00 | 16.00 |

| Items | SA (%) | Agree (%) | Nutral (%) | Disagree (%) | SD (%) |
|--|-----------|--------------|---------------|-----------------|-----------|
| Arrange marriage has been preferred by local youths | 0.00 | 33.00 | 2.00 | 64.00 | 2.00 |
| Women cannot express their emotion due to the cultural restriction | 8.00 | 64.00 | 2.00 | 27.00 | 0.00 |
| Sexual relationship should not be established before marriage life | 14.00 | 71.00 | 14.00 | 1.00 | 0.00 |
| Men and women should equally engage in household chores and childcare | 20.00 | 66.00 | 2.00 | 12.00 | 0.00 |
| Men and women should equally engage in social, political and economic activity | 21.00 | 63.00 | 5.00 | 11.00 | 0.00 |

The responses indicate generally positive attitudes toward gender equality among the 132 respondents. Most disagree that men are superior, women should not own property, or should be excluded from economic, social, and political activities, reflecting support for women’s empowerment. A large proportion also strongly agree that women are an essential part of society and that men and women should equally share household chores, childcare, and participation in social, political, and economic activities. While traditional beliefs, such as arranged marriages and cultural restrictions on women’s emotional expression, persist for some, overall, the findings demonstrate a gradual shift toward more gender-friendly attitudes and recognition of women’s roles in household and community decision-making.

6.3 Factors for Gender Construction

This study developed 15 items to measure the factors influencing gender construction. Almost all the items received “agree” or “strongly agree” (SA) responses from the respondents (Table 2). Among them, the statements “higher education levels for women” (93%), “death of husband” (88%), “social media, radio, and television” (85%), and “socio-economic status” (79%) received the highest levels of agreement.

In contrast, the items “disability” (41%), “caste and ethnicity” (40%), and “gender-responsive budget” (30%) received the highest levels of disagreement.

Research across 82 studies spanning 29 countries—primarily in North America and Europe—identified the cultural environment, family influences, and peer groups as key determinants in gender construction (Kagesten, 2016). Another study found that in both developed and developing nations, fathers predominantly retain the final decision-making authority over critical household and family welfare matters (Engle, 1997). Similarly, Ljunge (2016) observed that masculine culture, shaped by both parents, influences gender roles among immigrant children from 70 countries. Shrestha (2015) also reported that gender disparity in Nepalese society is rooted in the patriarchal system and religious beliefs.

Table 2. Influencing Factors for Gender Construction (n=132)

| | SA (%) | Agree (%) | Nutral (%) | Disagree (%) | SD (%) |
|--------------------------------------|-----------|--------------|---------------|-----------------|-----------|
| Caste/ethnicity | 2.00 | 56.00 | 2.00 | 38.00 | 2.00 |
| Socio-economic situation | 7.00 | 72.00 | 2.00 | 19.00 | 0.00 |
| Geography and environnement | 2.00 | 63.00 | 4.00 | 32.00 | 0.00 |
| Gender identity | 19.00 | 67.00 | 2.00 | 12.00 | 0.00 |
| Heterosexual orientation | 2.00 | 63.00 | 14.00 | 21.00 | 0.00 |
| Disability | 2.00 | 54.00 | 4.00 | 41.00 | 0.00 |
| Domestic violence | 5.00 | 73.00 | 2.00 | 20.00 | 0.00 |
| Single women | 17.00 | 71.00 | 5.00 | 7.00 | 1.00 |
| Unemployment of men | 8.00 | 70.00 | 3.00 | 18.00 | 1.00 |
| Involving in foreign employment | 6.00 | 73.00 | 4.00 | 16.00 | 1.00 |
| War, conflict and political movement | 2.00 | 77.00 | 5.00 | 15.00 | 1.00 |
| Gender responsive polices | 2.00 | 68.00 | 5.00 | 23.00 | 2.00 |
| Gender responsive budget | 2.00 | 61.00 | 8.00 | 28.00 | 2.00 |
| Higher education access of women | 12.00 | 81.00 | 0.00 | 6.00 | 1.00 |
| Social media, radio and television | 5.00 | 80.00 | 3.00 | 12.00 | 1.00 |

The findings indicate that multiple factors shape gender constructions in the study area, with respondents largely agreeing on the significance of education, media exposure, socio-economic status, and policy measures. Higher education access for women (93% agreement), social media/radio/television influence (85%), domestic violence (78%), and socio-economic situation (79%) were identified as the most influential factors. Other important determinants included gender identity, single women's status, male unemployment, involvement in foreign employment, and exposure to war, conflict, or political movements. In contrast, factors such as disability, caste/ethnicity, and gender-responsive budgets received comparatively higher disagreement, suggesting they are perceived as less directly influential. Overall, the results highlight that both structural and social factors, including education, economic conditions, media, and policy interventions, play key roles in shaping gender norms and perceptions in rural Nepal.

6.4 Life Prospects of Women

Changing gender roles have encouraged parents to adopt more gender-friendly attitudes at both household and community levels. All respondents (100%) agreed that the number of girls studying in schools, colleges, and universities has increased. Additionally, nearly 89% of respondents agreed that interactions between women and men are becoming more frequent. Around 88% acknowledged the increased involvement of women in social and cultural activities.

Similarly, most respondents agreed that women's participation has increased in economic activities, their empowerment status has improved, more families are led by women, women's decision-making roles at the household level have expanded, and women's involvement in foreign employment, government jobs, private employment, and leadership roles has grown. However, 18% of respondents noted that competition between men and women is increasing day by day. Furthermore, a majority agreed that the prevalence of forced marriage and child marriage has significantly decreased.

In summary, the study reveals that respondents, comprising 55% males and 45% females, are predominantly aged 20–40 years, with the majority belonging to the Chhetri community. Land ownership varies, with many families holding 6–9 ropani of irrigated or rain-fed land, though over half lack irrigated farmland. Family members are mainly engaged in agriculture, business, government jobs, foreign employment, and private work, with most households earning a low-to-middle monthly income. Attitudes toward gender equality are generally positive, with most respondents supporting women's involvement in economic, social, and political activities, property ownership, and household decision-making, though traditional gender roles persist to some extent. Key factors influencing gender construction include higher education for women, social media exposure, socio-economic status, and widowhood, while disability, caste/ethnicity, and gender-responsive budgets received more disagreement. Regarding life prospects, respondents reported increased female participation in education, social

and cultural activities, economic work, household decision-making, leadership, and employment, alongside a notable decline in forced and child marriages, indicating gradual shifts toward gender equality and women's empowerment in the study area. The following section discusses the findings on gender constructions and their influence on the life prospects of women.

7. Discussion: Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment

Gender equality ensures equal power and opportunity for men and women in areas such as financial independence, education, and personal development. Therefore, gender equality directly influences the socio-cultural, economic, and political empowerment of women. Socio-cultural empowerment reflects the general status of women in terms of literacy, educational attainment, age at marriage, and participation in activities outside the home (Mazhar, 2017). In many Asian countries, gender discrimination remains prevalent, with women facing control and restrictions imposed by men in their daily lives (Khan, 2010). However, the situation in Nepal appears to be improving. Most interviewees in this research shared that women from all ethnic groups, including Dalits, now actively participate in household and community-level cultural ceremonies and functions, becoming increasingly active and interactive.

Economic empowerment involves equal access to and control over economic resources, enabling women to utilize them effectively (Samman, 2016). Globally, 2.7 billion women are restricted from having the same job opportunities as men, often working in informal or unpaid household roles (UN Women, 2015). Conversely, in the study area, rural women are increasingly involved in economic activities such as commercial vegetable farming and dairy production. In recent years, they have also gained economic independence through government jobs, private employment, and foreign employment, supported by capacity-building trainings and incentives provided by local governments and development stakeholders.

Political empowerment stems from women's active participation in political decision-making processes. Worldwide, women comprise only 15% of lawmakers across 183 parliaments, with significant regional variations (Leyenaar, 2004). In the study area, most interviewees expressed concerns about women's limited access to key political positions, despite provisions for their participation in local-level committees. While these representative measures have somewhat empowered women politically, further reforms are needed to increase women's involvement in political and governance structures.

Overall, this study finds that gender equality—covering socio-cultural, economic, and political dimensions—has been improving in the research area, though challenges remain. Women, including those from marginalized groups, now participate more actively in cultural and community events, reflecting progress in socio-cultural

empowerment. Economic opportunities have expanded through farming, dairy production, formal jobs, and foreign employment, supported by local initiatives and training. Politically, while reserved seats and committee participation have boosted representation, women still face barriers to holding key decision-making positions, indicating the need for further reforms to achieve full empowerment.

8. Theoretical Reflection

Conflict theory posits that social problems arise when dominant groups exploit subordinate groups, making it difficult for women to assert their rights due to economic dependence on men (O'Neil, 2017). However, rural women are becoming increasingly aware and skilled, challenging dominant male groups and advocating for their rights.

Social structural theory suggests that society creates gender roles and stereotypes, which shape power dynamics and gender statuses (Freedman, 1993; Risman et al., 2018). In the study area, gender constructions and roles have gradually become more women-friendly, with husbands and male counterparts encouraging women to participate in economic and political activities. Functionalist theory argues for a functional division of labor between men and women, emphasizing the importance of women's roles in socialization and childcare (Baligar, 2018). However, in the study area, both men and women are actively involved in household chores, childcare, and decision-making processes, challenging traditional gender roles. Although traditional theories highlight gendered power imbalances and roles, rural women in the study area are increasingly active and supported in economic, political, and household spheres.

9. Conclusion

The deeply rooted Hindu patriarchal system in Nepal is gradually changing, with gender constructions becoming more anti-patriarchal and women increasingly empowered socially, economically, and politically. Key drivers include gender-sensitive policies, gender-responsive budgets, educational access, media influence, and supportive family and community systems. These changes have improved women's participation in decision-making, reduced forced marriages, and challenged traditional gender roles. Future research can explore the long-term impacts of these shifts, regional variations, and the role of intersectional factors such as caste, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. Practically, strengthening policies, promoting awareness, supporting capacity-building programs, and encouraging male engagement can further enhance gender equality. Overall, women in rural Nepal are becoming more confident and active, driving positive social change in their communities.

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