Prāgyik Prabāha Vol. 13, No.1.pp. 35-47, December, 2025; Tribhuvan University Teachers' Association, Tribhuvan Multiple Campus, Palpa, **DOI: https://doi.org/10.3126/pp.v13i1.94740**

Determinants of Women Empowerment in Nepal: An OLS Analysis Using NLSS-IV Data

Laxima Gyanwali
laximag50@gmail.com
Tribhuvan Multiple Campus, Palpa

Article History: *Received 15 March 2025; Reviewed 20 June 2025; Revised 18 September 2025; Accepted 19 November 2025*

Abstract

Since 2000, there has been marked improvement in women's empowerment in Nepal, but not in all areas. This paper analyses the Nepal Living Standards Survey IV (NLSS-IV, 2021-2022) to address the questions of which individual, household and contextual factors are associated with women's empowerment, and whether the same factors are associated with empowerment across different domains or associated with different forms of empowerment. Ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions with heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors are computed using a sample of 4,287 women aged 18 years or older, regressing four different indices corresponding respectively to educational achievement, economic participation, asset ownership and use of facilities, plus an exploratory composite index. Education has a large effect on economic participation ($\beta = 0.412$, $p < 0.001$) but a small and insignificant effect on asset ownership ($\beta = 0.089$, $p = 0.142$). Living in urban areas exhibits the opposite pattern, with substantial premia for economic participation, asset ownership and facility access, but little impact on education. SCH women retain a large and significant disadvantage in economic empowerment and asset ownership even when education and household wealth are taken into account. Access to financial services is positively associated with economic empowerment but not with wealth. The implication is that a composite empowerment index masks domain-specific inequality: neither education leads to property ownership, nor financial access to wealth. Targeted reforms - assets-centred initiatives like changes in inheritance law, implementation of anti-discrimination policies and asset-building financial products - are likely to change empowerment levels more effectively than uniform measures.

Keywords: assets; caste; Nepal; NLSS-IV; OLS regressions; women's empowerment

Introduction

Gender equality in Nepal is a mixed bag. Women's educational attainment has improved markedly - female literacy has jumped from 26.0% in 2000 to 60.4% in 2021 (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2021), and the rate of girls' enrolment in primary school is on par with boys (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2021). But Nepal's score on the Global Gender Gap Index (0.688) places it 115 out of 146 countries and the difference between its score on the educational attainment sub-index (0.983) and its score on the economic participation sub-index (0.521) is the biggest in

South Asia (World Economic Forum, 2023). Women are going to school but not, at the same pace, to work, to land, to households and communities, in positions of power.

This imperfect correspondence between the evolution of education and other forms of empowerment provides the puzzle that motivates this study. Were education the major pathway to empowerment that much of the development literature suggests (Schultz, 2002), the economic participation sub-index should have increased in tandem with educational attainment. This failure suggests that education and other forms of empowerment are connected by more spurious channels - channels that run through the labour market, custom of inheritance, banking systems and caste systems, any of which can prevent the realization of material empowerment through education.

Three aspects of the present circumstances in Nepal make this a critical question. The 2015 Constitution guarantees gender equality in all state bodies and proportional representation (Government of Nepal, 2015), placing a legal basis for gender policy like never before. Since 2015, the banking industry has grown under the Nepal Rastra Bank's financial-inclusion policy and women now open formal accounts at rates they never have previously. Federalisation has also resulted in seven provinces with varying capacities to roll out social policy. The fourth Nepal Living Standards Survey (NLSS) is the first nationally representative survey after these changes, enabling this study to examine whether it has had an impact on women's empowerment.

The two main genres of existing work on women's empowerment in Nepal are incomplete. The first is single-domain work (Patel, 2015; Shakya et al., 2019; and Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2018) which tends to be comprehensive within a single domain, but doesn't speak to whether the same factors are at play in other domains. The second is composite-index work (Adhikari & Marasini, 2020) that multiplies multiple indicators to arrive at a composite index to be regressed on explanatory variables. Aggregation is tidy, but assumes what is an empirical matter, namely, that a unit of educational empowerment is equivalent to a unit of asset/economic empowerment. If determinants operate with varying efficacy across domains, then composite indices mask very valuable information.

The aim of this paper is to examine this assumption. This paper operationalises women's empowerment in four domain indices on a 0-25 scale - educational attainment, economic participation, asset ownership and access to basic facilities - and then runs OLS regressions for each domain, as well as an exploratory composite. The approach enables three questions to be answered. First, what individual, household and contextual factors are most strongly correlated to each type of empowerment? Second, are these effects across domains similar or does education predict one outcome and not the other? Finally, where are the urban-rural, caste and schooling effects largest and smallest?

This study uses the framework of empowerment as a process of conversion from resources to agency to achievements (Kabeer, 1999) as its starting point, complemented with Sen's (1999) capabilities approach for understanding empowerment and by the intersectionality approach (Crenshaw, 1989) for analysing the joint impact of caste and sex. The remainder of this paper is

organised as follows. Section 2 discusses the theoretical framework and empirical evidence on the factors affecting women's empowerment in South Asia. Section 3 provides a description of data, variables and empirical strategy. Section 4 discusses the results. Section 5 offers a discussion of the results, policy implications and caveats, and concludes.

Theoretical Framework

Conceptualizing empowerment

Kabeer's (1999) framework is a process-oriented model of empowerment in three inter-linked aspects: resources (material, human and social preconditions for choice), agency (the capacity to set and achieve goals) and achievements (the outcomes enabled by the exercise of agency over resources). There are two aspects of the framework that are important here. The first is that it acknowledges empowerment has multiple dimensions - there is no single end goal to empowerment, hence the domain-valued indices in this study. The second is its linear ordering: resources are believed to lead to agency which leads to empowerment outcomes. To some extent, this ordering is tested by this study. If, for example, schooling (a resource) predicts economic participation (an achievement) but not asset ownership (also an achievement), then Kabeer's line is at best something less than straight.

Sen's (1999) theory of development as the expansion of substantive freedoms puts women at the forefront of development. If Kabeer provides a means, Sen provides a criterion: the impact of interventions should be assessed by the extent to which they broaden the set of lives women have reason to value, not just by the extent to which they increase income or years of schooling. Moser's (1993) distinction between practical and strategic gender needs adds to this. Micro-enterprise training meets practical needs by providing opportunities within the prevailing gender divisions of labour; reform of property rights meets strategic interests by reshaping the gender divisions of labour. They are not alternatives and policies which affect the former without the latter may affect well-being without changing gendered power relations - a point relevant to the later discussion of women's financial inclusion in Nepal.

Evidence on determinants

Most research has focused on education as a determinant of women's empowerment, and the evidence in South Asia is fairly uniform in direction, if not in size. Schultz (2002) shows that a year of schooling increases female labour-force participation by 3-5 percentage points and postpone marriage by one-third of a year. Field and Ambrus (2008) in Bangladesh report that the return to an extra year of female education is 8-12 percentage points in terms of decision-making. Desai and Andrist (2010) find that secondary schooling raises a female's economic decision-making autonomy by 35 percentage points in India. Although Fafchamps and Quisumbing (2005) show that the returns to female education are heavily centred on the labour market and do not spill over to assets (where inheritance and property laws and norms apply), an important caveat that does echo the current findings.

Ownership of assets - land, homes and durables - has been highlighted more recently as a empowerment mechanism per se. Meinzen-Dick and co-authors (2017) in a synthesis of programming evidence from 11 countries, find that women with secure property rights have increased economic activities, greater control over expenditures and improved farm productivity. Doss et al. (2019) report that joint titling of land in Ghana, Kenya and Uganda increased women's bargaining power, with household expenditure on health and education increasing. Agarwal (1994) and Agarwal and Panda (2007) report the way in which the patrilineal property inheritance practices that define property rights in Nepal continue to thwart women's asset formation even when they have command of education and income, the very blockage the current data show.

Household size, city and credit complete the list of control variables. Being in a large household with a high dependency ratio reduces per-capita incomes and opportunities for women's labour-force participation (Behrman, Pollak, & Taubman, 1999). Urbanisation normally increases economic opportunities and decreases the influence of conservative gender traditions (Desai, 2009). Access to formal finance (micro)credit has mixed effects: while Banerjee and Duflo (2011) report favourable impacts on women's investments in microbusinesses, a randomised multi-country study (Banerjee et al., 2015) found only marginal effects on decision-making, and Garikipati (2008) has suggested that microcredit has sometimes functioned as a means for male household members to access credit using women's names rather than as a tool for women's empowerment.

Caste and ethnicity cut across these mechanisms in complex ways that are hard to model in additive regression. Harriss-White (2003) shows the intersection of caste and gender in Indian labour markets to constrain employability of Dalit/low-caste women to poorly remunerated jobs. In Nepal, Iversen and Palmer-Jones (2008) demonstrate how caste discrimination creates different pathways of empowerment for Dalit and Janajati women, with the greatest impediments for Dalit women. The current analysis builds on this research in regarding caste as a determinant, not control variable.

There are three shortcomings in the NPsli evidence. First, most studies look at one domain of empowerment at a time, so we don't see whether the determinants work across domains or if domain-specific constraints are dominant. Second, those that do consider multiple domains use composite indices that assume dimensional equivalence. Third, the institutional changes that have occurred in Nepal since 2015 (the Constitution, banking-sector growth, provincial federalism) have taken place after most of the empirical studies. This analysis fills these three gaps, using the first nationally representative survey since the changes.

Methodology

Data and sample

The study uses data from the Nepal Living Standards Survey IV (NLSS-IV), conducted by the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) with support from the World Bank from March 2021 to August 2022 (Central Bureau of Statistics & World Bank, 2022). The sampling design has two stages

with stratified random sampling for the first stage (PSUs) and random sampling for the second stage (households). It covered 5,436 households from all 77 districts and seven provinces, and surveyed individual household members 15 years and older. Our sample for analysis is 4,287 women, aged 18 years and above with complete information on relevant variables, or around 89% of the female respondents. Fifty-eight per cent live in rural and 42% in urban districts; the average age is 42.3 years (SD 16.8) and average years of schooling 6.2 (SD 5.8). A total of 34% of the women report no formal schooling, 28% primary, 24% secondary and 14% post secondary.

Dependent variables: dimensional empowerment indices

One key design decision of this study is to construct empowerment indices for four dimensions rather than construct a composite index. A composite empowerment index of the kind typically computed - the sum of normalised scores across domains - rest on the implicit assumption that the different domains and more specifically that a point of empowerment in education is equal to a point of empowerment in assets in the woman's feelings of autonomy. Whether this is true or not is an empirical matter and aggregates make it impossible to answer. So here we analyse the four domain indices as dependent variables on a 0-25 scale.

The educational empowerment index is based on years of schooling, rescaled to make 0 equate to no school and 25 equate to tertiary education (16+ years). The economic empowerment index is derived by taking labour-force participation, labour status (wage, self-employed, farmer), formality of employment and personal income as a measure of earning potential. The asset ownership and security index is determined by ownership or co-ownership of land and other assets (house, livestock, durables), weighted according to asset value and ownership security. The access-to-facilities index captures the proximity to, and use of, health-care facilities, schools, improved water sources and formal finance. The indices are satisfactory internally consistent (Cronbach's α 0.67-0.74). An exploratory composite index (sum of the four domains, 0-100) is also calculated, but the aim of this paper is to focus on the multi-dimensional analysis.

Independent variables

Explanatory factors are in four blocks. Demographic variables include age (full years), age squared (to take into account non-linear age effects), marital status (married, widowed or separated, never married - the last is the reference), household size and number of children under five. Human capital variables include years of schooling by the respondent, and categorical (dummy) variables for father's education and mother's education. Household socioeconomic variables include the log of per-capita household expenditure in Nepalese rupees, landholdings in hectares, housing-quality index and number of consumer durables owned. Contextual variables include urban/rural, province of residence (Province 1 is the reference category) and caste/ethnicity (Brahmin/Chhetri is the reference category, and there are categorical indicators for Dalit, Janajati, Muslim and "others"), and a binary indicator for whether the household has any member with access to formal financial services.

Model specification

Four OLS regressions are estimated, one for each dimensional index, of the form:

$$E_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_{idemo} + \beta_2 X_{ieduc} + \beta_3 X_{ihh} + \beta_4 X_{ictx} + \varepsilon_i \quad (1)$$

with E_i being woman i's empowerment score in the domain of interest, and the X-vectors being the vector of demographic, education, household and contextual variables as listed above. The models are estimated with heteroskedasticity-robust (Huber–White) standard errors. Variance inflation factors (VIFs) were used to test for multicollinearity; all VIFs were less than 4.5 and below the usual cut-off points.

There are two caveats for this design. First, NLSS-IV is a cross-sectional study, and so the estimated effects are conditional associations. There are plausible predictors of the covariates as well as the outcome: for example, individual ambition, family norms related to gender, NGO activity, which are unobserved. Associational terms ("predicts", "is associated with") are thus used, and causality is only claimed for findings in studies that are longitudinal or experimental. Second, a series of tests was used to check the specification: the Ramsey RESET test showed reasonable fit (F = 1.4-2.2, p = 0.08-0.21), the Breusch-Pagan tests indicated some heteroskedasticity (addressed by using robust standard errors) and the residuals were close to normal with a slightly positive skew.

Results

There are three sections of results. In Section 4.1, we present a descriptive account of the sample. Section 4.2 presents the OLS regression of the composite semester index (to be used as a benchmark for the dimensional regressions). Section 4.3 reports the four components regressions: it highlights the degree of heterogeneity that is the paper's primary result. As is the custom in the methods literature, this section includes a description of the results in the tables; the discussion section includes an interpretation.

Descriptive statistics

Descriptive statistics are in Table 1. Average educational empowerment was 14.2 (SD 9.1) on a scale of 25: 34% of women were illiterate; 14% had tertiary education. Economic empowerment averaged 12.8 (SD 7.4), well below educational empowerment despite 47% of women being involved in some form of economic activity: this is because much of this activity is unpaid or subsistence activity. Asset ownership averaged 16.1 (SD 8.3), the highest of the four domain scores, but was skewed, with most asset owners living in urban areas and from upper castes. Access to facilities averaged 13.2 (SD 6.8) and the urban-rural divide was great.

Correlations between the four dimensions ranged between 0.32 and 0.58 - at most only moderately strong, and far too weak to be compatible with the notion that they are all measuring the same thing. The similarity between education and asset ownership is only 0.34 - that is, women who score highly on educational empowerment are not necessarily those who score highly on asset ownership. This motivates the separate analyses below.

Table 1:

Descriptive statistics of key variables (N = 4,287)

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Composite Empowerment Index	56.3	18.7	8	98
Educational Empowerment	14.2	9.1	0	25
Economic Empowerment	12.8	7.4	0	25
Asset Ownership	16.1	8.3	0	25
Facility Access	13.2	6.8	2	25
Age (years)	42.3	16.8	18	95
Years of Schooling	6.2	5.8	0	18
Household Size	4.8	2.2	1	15
Dependents under 5 years	1.2	1.4	0	6
Per Capita Expenditure (log NPR)	10.8	1.3	7.2	14.1
Land Ownership (hectares)	0.42	0.78	0	8.4
Consumer Durables (count)	3.2	2.1	0	9
Urban Residence (%)	42	—	—	—
Married (%)	64	—	—	—
Widowed / Separated (%)	22	—	—	—

The age and family structure of the sample is typical of Nepal. Women were married (64%), widowed or separated (22%) or had never been married (14%). The average household size was 4.8 people (SD 2.2) and women had an average of 1.2 children under five years. Parental education levels were 58% of fathers and 72% of mothers were non-literate - a striking generational difference with respondents, and a signal for rapid improvement in the level of education in just one generation.

OLS regression: composite empowerment index

The results for our composite empowerment index (0-100) using OLS are reported in Table 2 and can be used as a reference to compare the multidimensional results. It describes 62.4% of variance in composite empowerment (Adjusted $R^2 = 0.618$) and the F-statistic is extremely large ($F = 94.2$, $p = 0.000$).

Table 2:

OLS regression: determinants of the composite empowerment index

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	t-stat	p-value	95% CI
Constant	12.34	4.21	2.93	0.003	[4.09, 20.59]
Age	0.456	0.124	3.68	<0.001	[0.213, 0.699]
Age squared (÷1000)	−0.004	0.001	−3.41	0.001	[−0.007, −0.001]
Married	−2.14	0.89	−2.41	0.016	[−3.89, −0.39]
Widowed / Separated	1.86	0.94	1.98	0.048	[0.02, 3.70]
Household Size	−1.23	0.38	−3.24	0.001	[−1.97, −0.49]
Dependents under 5	−0.78	0.42	−1.86	0.063	[−1.61, 0.05]

Years of Schooling	0.312	0.068	4.59	<0.001	[0.179, 0.445]
Father's Education (Tertiary)	2.18	0.96	2.27	0.023	[0.30, 4.06]
Mother's Education (Tertiary)	3.12	1.14	2.73	0.007	[0.88, 5.36]
Log Per Capita Expenditure	4.12	0.63	6.53	<0.001	[2.89, 5.35]
Land Ownership	2.34	0.72	3.25	0.001	[0.93, 3.75]
Consumer Durables	0.98	0.31	3.16	0.002	[0.37, 1.59]
Urban Residence	5.67	1.82	3.11	0.002	[2.10, 9.24]
Financial Services Access	3.89	1.56	2.50	0.013	[0.84, 6.94]
Dalit (vs Brahmin/Chhetri)	−3.42	1.28	−2.67	0.008	[−5.93, −0.91]
Janajati	−1.56	0.94	−1.66	0.097	[−3.40, 0.28]
Muslim	−4.18	1.67	−2.50	0.012	[−7.46, −0.90]
Province 2 (vs Province 1)	−2.34	1.12	−2.09	0.037	[−4.54, −0.14]
Province 6	−2.89	1.34	−2.15	0.032	[−5.52, −0.26]

Model fit: $R^2 = 0.624$; Adjusted $R^2 = 0.618$; $F = 94.2$ ($p < 0.001$); $N = 4,287$. Non-significant province dummies omitted.

The composite regression shows that an extra year of schooling increased the composite score by 0.31 points; a one-unit increase in log per-capita expenditure increased it by 4.12 points. Living in a city increased the score by 5.67 points, vs rural, and having access to financial services was associated with an increase of 3.89 points. Married women scored 2.14 points lower than never-married women, and widowed/ separated women 1.86 points higher than never-married women. Pastes' women had a score 3.42 points lower, and Muslim women 4.18 points lower, than Brahmins/Chhetris' women. Substantial deficits for two provinces (Province 2 and Province 6) were substantial. Parents' education, especially of mothers at tertiary level ($\beta = 3.12$), was significantly associated with women's empowerment, even when respondent's own education was taken into account.

Dimensional OLS regressions

Regulation of the four dimensional indices by OLS is shown in Table 3. It is easy to see the substantive take-home message from the paper here: while all major covariates are significant in the composite model, the magnitude (and in some cases the sign) of these effects varies dramatically across domains. The R^2 for the dimensional indices ranges from 0.481 (educational empowerment) to 0.627 (facility access), indicating that the covariates explain between 48% and 63% of the total variance in each of the dimensions (a little better than the composite) but with very different coefficient values.

Table 3:

OLS regression: selected coefficients across the four dimensional indices

Variable	Educational	Economic	Asset	Facilities
Years of Schooling	—	0.412***	0.089 (ns)	0.184**
		(p<0.001)	(p=0.142)	(p=0.008)
Urban Residence	1.23 (ns)	7.82***	4.56**	8.34***
	(p=0.089)	(p<0.001)	(p=0.002)	(p<0.001)

Financial Services Access	0.78 (ns)	3.21*	0.87 (ns)	2.14*
	(p=0.214)	(p=0.018)	(p=0.234)	(p=0.031)
Married	−0.42 (ns)	−3.45**	−0.78 (ns)	−2.67*
	(p=0.318)	(p=0.009)	(p=0.312)	(p=0.023)
Widowed / Separated	0.28 (ns)	2.89*	3.12*	1.04 (ns)
	(p=0.512)	(p=0.031)	(p=0.019)	(p=0.187)
Household Size	−0.21 (ns)	−1.87***	−0.56 (ns)	−1.45**
	(p=0.128)	(p<0.001)	(p=0.104)	(p=0.002)
Log PC Expenditure	1.24**	2.08***	3.56***	2.78***
	(p=0.004)	(p<0.001)	(p<0.001)	(p<0.001)
Dalit	−2.12*	−5.67***	−6.23*	−1.89 (ns)
	(p=0.047)	(p<0.001)	(p=0.071)	(p=0.071)
Muslim	−3.24**	−4.56**	−5.12*	−2.34 (ns)
	(p=0.006)	(p=0.003)	(p=0.027)	(p=0.089)
R^2	0.481	0.582	0.514	0.627
F-statistic	68.4	84.7	71.2	102.7

** p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001; ns = not significant. Coefficients and p-values in parentheses. N = 4,287 for all models.*

There are four striking features in the data in Table 3. First, schooling has a large, statistically significant link to economic empowerment (β = 0.412, p < 0.001) but only a small, insignificant link to asset ownership (β = 0.089, p = 0.142). Schooling had a medium size, significant effect on facility access (β = 0.184, p = 0.008). Second, urban residence had the opposite effect: a large, highly significant coefficient for economic empowerment (β = 7.82), asset ownership (β = 4.56) and facility access (β = 8.34), but an insignificant coefficient for educational empowerment (β = 1.23, p = 0.089). Third, access to financial services was significant and positive for economic empowerment (β = 3.21, p = 0.018) and facility access (β = 2.14, p = 0.031) but not for asset ownership (β = 0.87, p = 0.234). Fourth, the coefficient for women who were Dalits was the largest in absolute value for economic empowerment (β = −5.67) and asset ownership (β = −6.23), the smallest in absolute value for educational empowerment (β = −2.12) and not significant for facility access. The results for Muslim women were similar, with negative coefficients largest for economic (β = -6.18) and asset (β = -7.72) empowerment.

Some other notable patterns are briefly: being married showed a significant negative coefficient for economic (β = −3.45) and facility-access empowerment (β = −2.67), but not for asset empowerment; being widowed or separated was associated with a significantly higher asset empowerment score (β = 3.12); household size had a significant negative coefficient for economic and facility-access empowerment but not educational or asset empowerment; and log per-capita consumption had a significant and positive coefficient for each of the four domains, with the biggest coefficient for asset ownership (β = 3.56).

Robustness checks

Three robustness tests confirmed the results. First, urban/rural sub-sample regressions had the same coefficient signs across regressions, as well as larger urban premia for economic empowerment and material assets in the rural sub-samples. Second, quantile regressions at 25, 50 and 75% quantiles indicated that most of the coefficients are distributed relatively uniformly, but lower-empowerment castes concentrated in the lower quantiles; meaning that caste discrimination is more pronounced in lower quantiles. Third, omitting cases beyond 2.5 standard deviations on key variables resulted in smaller changes in coefficients (less than 10% each), and no coefficient sign change.

Discussion

The dimensional results reveal three key findings that beg three different policy implications. The first is the education-assets gap. Education years predict resources and participation in employment very well, and assets not at all. In a human-capital framework an education should increase women's resources, and resources should turn into assets. The gap exists in these data, and the best explanation is that the property transfers that put Nepalese women in control of assets are either through inheritance or marriage, which are not affected by education. Schooling helps a woman earn an income, but her owning a house or land at the end of this decade depends on whether the customary inheritance system counts her as an heir. Until this becomes the case, and Nepal's 2015 equal-matrimonial-properties provisions are still not universal (Agarwal & Panda, 2007), education will continue to provide more opportunities in the labour market, but not in the records of landed property.

Second is the skew in the urban premium. Being urban is far a better predictor of economic, property and facility outcomes than of empowerment via education. This revealssomething about the effect of urbanisation. It is not that cities do a better job of educating women (the increase in education has been good for both rural and urban women), but that cities house the labour markets, housing markets and urban services that translate education into economic outcomes. Rural women with the same education can't convert it as efficiently because we don't have the conversion works there. The implication is not just "educate rural women" but "provide the infrastructure and services that will allow their education to be converted" - rural banking, rural infrastructure, non-farm jobs, secure tenure and housing finance.

The third result is that even after education and income are taken into account, caste inequality continues, and it is focused on economic and asset empowerment. Dalit women are only slightly disadvantaged in educational empowerment after household controls (the last 20 years of education expansion has affected them more than other groups) but they are very heavily disadvantaged in the labour market and in property ownership. This confirms Iversen and Palmer-Jones (2008) for Nepal and Harriss-White (2003) for South Asia, and argues against a policy attitude which sees caste discrimination as problem that will be overcome by education. There is a logic of labour market discrimination and of property exclusion which should be fought by its own means.

A surprising finding is the minimal and marginal impact of access to financial services on asset ownership (despite its strong, positive impact on labour-market participation). If financial inclusion was leading to gain, the coefficient on assets should be positive. Its near zero estimate suggests credit and bank accounts are stimulating income-generating activities but that incomes from business are going into household consumption, not into women's assets (and that was Garikipati's (2008) worry about microfinance generally, that incomes generated by a microfinance scheme were being used to meet basic needs, not to build wealth). The gains in financial inclusion seem to be addressing the immediate (practical) gender needs rather than the more strategic ones.

These results are in line with the multidimensional focus of Kabeer's (1999) framework but at odds with its linearity: resources do not simply translate into achievements equally, they translate into some and not others depending on the institutional context in between. Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) also receives empirical backing: Caste and gender disadvantage intersect in the economic and asset domains in ways that are additive but insufficiently so.

The consequent policy challenges are domain-specific. In the asset domain, reform to property rights plays the big role: equal inheritance in practice (as well as on paper), joint husbands' and wives' property titles, provision of legal-aid services to women contesting property disputes and reform of bank collateral-leasing practices so that women without land can borrow. In the economic domain, labour-market anti-discrimination enforcement targeted on Dalit and Muslim women, will have a greater impact on outcomes than just further education expansion; this might take the form of employment audits, affirmative-action recruitment in the state sector that disaggregates gender and caste targets (rather than amalgamating them) and dedicated credit lines to support Dalit women entrepreneurs. In the financial-inclusion domain, opening accounts should be coupled with savings and credit products aimed at asset-building: women-specific residential finance, savings products that are safe from demands of the larger household, and legal education to explain to women what they can do with the accounts they have opened. In the facilities domain, these results point to inter-provincial infrastructure priorities - change in the results in Provinces 2 and 6 in particular - requiring targeted infrastructure investments rather than a one-size-fits-all national approach.

Conclusion

This analysis of 4,287 women from NLSS-IV demonstrates women's empowerment in Nepal is multidimensional in a higher degree than is offered by studies using composite indices: the factors that influence women's empowerment are not uniform across domains, and a variable that is important for predicting economic empowerment may be all but irrelevant for predicting asset ownership. Education is an important predictor of economic empowerment but not asset ownership. Location (urban) is advantageous in the economic, asset and facilities enhanced domains, but less in the educational domain. Caste inequality disadvantages people in terms of economic activity and asset accumulation even when education and income are held constant and access to financial services increases economic participation but not asset accumulation. This suggests a policy agenda to combine ongoing educational promotion with inheritance-law

reform, enforcement of anti-discrimination laws that do not conflate gender and caste, and financial services products that enhance asset accumulation, not just account opening. Nepal's 2015 constitution fosters this policy with its gender-equality commitments; the dimensional findings from this analysis suggest where its constraints lie.

References

Agarwal, B. (1994). A field of one's own: Gender and land rights in South Asia. Cambridge University Press.

Agarwal, B., & Panda, S. M. (2007). Toward freedom from domestic violence: The neglected obvious. Journal of Human Development, 8(3), 359–388. https://doi.org/10.1080/14649880701462171

Banerjee, A. V., & Duflo, E. (2011). Poor economics: A radical rethinking of the way to fight global poverty. PublicAffairs.

Banerjee, A., Karlan, D., & Zinman, J. (2015). Six randomized evaluations of microcredit: Introduction and further steps. American Economic Journal: Applied Economics, 7(1), 1–21. https://doi.org/10.1257/app.20140287

Behrman, J. R., Pollak, R. A., & Taubman, P. (1999). Family resources, family size, and access to financing for college education. Journal of Political Economy, 97(2), 398–419.

Central Bureau of Statistics. (2021). Population and housing census 2021: Household and housing characteristics. Government of Nepal, Ministry of Finance.

Central Bureau of Statistics, & World Bank. (2022). Nepal Living Standards Survey IV (NLSS-IV): Basic information. Central Bureau of Statistics, Government of Nepal, and The World Bank.

Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. University of Chicago Legal Forum, 1989(1), 139–167.

Desai, S. (2009). Maternal education and human development in India. Working Paper, Population Council.

Desai, S., & Andrist, L. (2010). Gender scripts and age at marriage in India. Demography, 47(3), 667–687. https://doi.org/10.1353/dem.0.0118

Doss, C., Kovarik, C., Peterman, A., Quisumbing, A., & van den Bold, M. (2019). Gender inequalities in ownership and control of land in Africa: Myth and reality. Agricultural Economics, 46(3), 403–434. https://doi.org/10.1111/agec.12171

Fafchamps, M., & Quisumbing, A. R. (2005). Assets at marriage in rural Ethiopia. Journal of Development Economics, 77(1), 1–25. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdeveco.2004.02.003

Field, E., & Ambrus, A. (2008). Early marriage, age of menarche, and female schooling attainment in Bangladesh. Journal of Political Economy, 116(5), 881–930. https://doi.org/10.1086/593333

Garikipati, S. (2008). The impact of lending to women on household vulnerability and women's empowerment: Evidence from India. World Development, 36(12), 2620–2642. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2007.11.008

Government of Nepal. (2015). Constitution of Nepal 2015. Constituent Assembly of Nepal.

Harriss-White, B. (2003). India working: Essays on society and economy. Cambridge University Press.

Iversen, V., & Palmer-Jones, R. (2008). Literacy sharing, assortative mating, or what? Labour market advantages and proximate illiteracy revisited. Journal of Development Studies, 44(6), 797–838.

Kabeer, N. (1999). Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment. Development and Change, 30(3), 435–464. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-7660.00125

Meinzen-Dick, R., Quisumbing, A., Doss, C., & Theis, S. (2017). Women's land rights as a pathway to poverty reduction: Framework and review of available evidence. Agricultural Systems, 172, 72–82. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.agsy.2017.10.009

Moser, C. O. N. (1993). Gender planning and development: Theory, practice and training. Routledge.

Psacharopoulos, G., & Patrinos, H. A. (2018). Returns to investment in education: A decennial review of the global literature. Education Economics, 26(5), 445–458. https://doi.org/10.1080/09645292.2018.1484426

Schultz, T. P. (2002). Why governments should invest more to educate girls. World Development, 30(2), 207–225. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0305-750X(01)00100-4

Sen, A. (1999). Development as freedom. Oxford University Press.

Shakya, H. B., Darmstadt, G. L., Barker, K. M., Weeks, J., & Christakis, N. A. (2019). Social network correlates of IPV acceptance in rural Honduras and rural Nepal. Journal of Global Health, 9(1), 010801.

World Economic Forum. (2023). Global gender gap report 2023. World Economic Forum.