



Gender Empowerment Measure in Nepal: An Appraisal from Intersectional Viewpoints

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Abstract

Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) serves as a critical tool for assessing women's empowerment, particularly in political participation. However, its effectiveness in the context of Nepal raises significant concerns. This paper examines the limitations of GEM, arguing that it inadequately captures the complexities of women's political engagement in Nepal. Internationally, GEM has faced critiques for its reliance on quantitative indicators that fail to account for qualitative aspects of empowerment, such as women's agency and autonomy. In the case of Nepal, despite constitutional mandates for gender representation, women's political participation remains hindered by socio-cultural barriers, such as patriarchy and caste based discrimination. The GEM framework's emphasis on national averages obscures the significant disparities experienced by marginalized women belonging to low-caste backgrounds. This paper highlights inevitability to incorporate intersectional perspective for upgrading gender empowerment measures in Nepal.

Keywords: GEM, Women's political participation, socio-cultural barriers, systemic inequalities

Manuscript Received
8 December, 2024

Final Revision
28 January, 2025

Accepted
3 January, 2025

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1. Introduction

GEM is a critical tool designed to evaluate women's empowerment and gender equality, particularly in the realms of political participation and economic decision-making (UNDP, 2019). However, effectiveness of GEM in capturing the complexities of women's political participation has been widely debated among international scholars. For instance, Kabeer (2005) emphasizes that GEM's reliance on quantitative indicators often overlooks the refinement socio-cultural and economic barriers that women face, especially in developing countries. This critique resonates particularly in the context of Nepal, where despite constitutional guarantees for women's representation, significant barriers persist.

In Nepal, the constitutional mandate of a minimum of 33 percent representation of women in legislative bodies has not translated into equitable political assignation. According to Jha (2020), women, particularly from marginalized groups such as the Dalits and the Madhesi community, continue to encounter systemic discrimination and cultural norms that hinder their political participation. Scholars such as Rai (2018) argue that GEM's framework does not adequately address the intersectionality of gender, caste, and class, which are critical factors influencing women's political agency in Nepal. This gap is further highlighted by Choudhary (2019), who points out that GEM's focus on macro-level indicators fails to capture the lived experiences and agency of women at the grassroots level.

The limited scope of GEM raises essential questions about its applicability and relevance in contexts characterized by diverse socio-political realities. As international feminist scholars advocate for a more comprehensive understanding of empowerment, there is a pressing need to critically assess the limitations of GEM in the context of women's political participation in Nepal. This article thus aims to appraise GEM issues in Nepalese context.

2. Methodology

This study employs a cross-sectional approach to analyze the effectiveness of GEM in Nepalese context. A cross-sectional approach is suitable for examining the status of women's empowerment at a specific point in time, providing a snapshot of how various factors such as caste, ethnicity, and socio-economic status influence political participation. The required data were collected from a combination of secondary sources, including government reports, UNDP data, and scholarly articles (UNDP, 2019; Jha, 2020). The intersectionality of gender, caste, and class including socio-cultural barriers, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of the factors

that hinder women's political engagement in Nepal (Kabeer, 2005; Crenshaw, 1989).

More so, an appraisal focus on how GEM fails to account for intersectional inequalities that impact women's political participation. By comparing national-level GEM data with micro-level qualitative studies, the study uncovered the disparities that marginalized groups—such as Dalits and indigenous women—experience in political settings (Rai, 2018; Bhandari, 2021). Additionally, the study critically explored existing policy interventions that has been emphasizing both quantitative outcomes and the qualitative dimensions of women empowerment, such as agency and autonomy (Collins, 2000; Acharya & Luitel, 2019).

3. Discussions and Findings

3.1. GEM in Global Context

GEM was a pioneering step toward evaluating gender equality globally. GEM's reliance on quantitative data—focusing on income, parliamentary representation, and employment—often fails to account for the nuanced social and cultural factors that influence women's empowerment across different contexts (Klasen, 2020). That is why Crenshaw (1989) developed intersectional approach in understanding the systems of oppression that affect marginalized groups, including women. This approach suggests that gender alone cannot explain women's experiences, but that the intersections of gender with other social categories like race, class, caste, and ethnicity profoundly shape their empowerment.

Recent studies emphasize the necessity of intersectionality in measuring gender empowerment across different global contexts. Kabeer (2016) points out that in many countries, including India and South Africa, the GEM framework fails to capture the compounded barriers faced by women who belong to marginalized racial, ethnic, or socio-economic groups. Women from lower castes, indigenous groups, and impoverished backgrounds often have less access to resources, lower representation in politics, and diminished decision-making power, despite constitutional or legislative reforms that aim to promote gender equality. Thus, applying intersectional lens of GEM provides a more detailed picture of the structural inequalities that continue to impede women's progress in different global contexts. For example, in Brazil, women of African descent face far more significant challenges in attaining economic independence and political representation than their white counterparts. This disparity is not reflected in the country's overall GEM score, which averages gender inequality at the national level without considering intra-group differences (Melo et al., 2021). Similarly, indigenous women in Canada

continue to face systemic discrimination in both economic and political domains, which remains invisible when focusing on broad, national GEM indicators (Fiske & Browne, 2021).

The Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI), for instance, is a multidimensional tool that measures women's control over agricultural resources, decision-making power, and autonomy. This index goes beyond income or employment data by incorporating qualitative measures that assess women's agency and capacity to make choices, a critical component missing in GEM (Alkire et al., 2013). Other scholars have proposed using a combination of quantitative and qualitative data to capture the holistic picture of gender empowerment. Klasen (2020) argues that focusing exclusively on numerical indicators, such as political representation or income levels, ignores the "lived experiences" of women, which are essential for understanding the broader context of empowerment. By incorporating qualitative data—such as women's perceptions of their own agency, their participation in household decision-making, and the socio-cultural norms that restrict them—researchers can gain a more comprehensive understanding of gender disparities.

Furthermore, the Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI) has been presented as an alternative to GEM. The GGGI measures gender disparities across four key areas: economic participation, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment. Unlike GEM, the GGGI allows for a more nuanced understanding of gender inequalities and is more flexible in capturing diverse global contexts. However, like GEM, the GGGI still faces criticisms for its lack of intersectional focus and reliance on national averages, which can obscure disparities within marginalized groups (World Economic Forum, 2021).

Therefore, the measurement of gender empowerment at the global level requires a more intersectional and nuanced approach. Incorporating an intersectional approach and exploring alternative frameworks, such as WEAI and the GGGI, can provide a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of women's empowerment. These changes will allow for more targeted policy interventions that address the specific needs of diverse groups of women, fostering more equitable outcomes globally.

3.2. GEM in Nepalese Context

The scholars argue that GEM failed to capture the complex realities of women's empowerment, Caste, ethnicity, and socio-economic status of the women heavily influence gender relations. These limitations highlight the need for alternative approaches to better assess the empowerment of marginalized women, particularly

Dalits and indigenous communities, in political and economic spheres (Acharya & Luitel, 2019; Dahal, 2021).

The intersectional approach, as pioneered by Crenshaw (1989), focuses on how various axes of identity—such as caste, ethnicity, and socio-economic status—interact to create unique forms of discrimination. In Nepal, women from marginalized groups such as Dalits, Madhesi, and indigenous communities face compounded barriers that hinder their political and economic participation. Studies show that while women from these communities may achieve representation in legislative bodies due to constitutional mandates, their ability to effect policy changes or make decisions is severely constrained by patriarchal norms, caste discrimination, and political marginalization (Jha, 2020).

In this regard, GEM, which relies primarily on national averages, obscures the disparities experienced by women from different backgrounds. For instance, Bhandari (2021) notes that Dalit women face higher levels of exclusion from political participation and leadership roles compared to their upper-caste counterparts. This discrepancy highlights the need for intersectional measures that can account for the specific socio-cultural and economic barriers of women. By integrating intersectionality into the measurement framework, policymakers can better understand and address the systemic inequalities that hinder true empowerment (Shrestha & Lama, 2020). According to Kabeer (2005), empowerment cannot be fully understood through quantitative indicators alone; qualitative measures are needed to capture women's lived experiences and agency. In Nepal, socio-cultural barriers are deeply entrenched, quantitative measures such as income or political representation may not accurately reflect the level of empowerment. Woman holding a political office might still be constrained by patriarchal attitudes that prevent her from exercising her decision-making power (Acharya & Luitel, 2019).

For Nepal, incorporating qualitative insights such as women's perceptions of their own agency, their access to resources, and the socio-cultural constraints they face would offer a more holistic understanding of empowerment (Garbuja & Pasa, 2020). Hence, GEM in Nepal must move beyond the traditional framework. By accounting for the unique barriers that marginalized women face and integrating qualitative data on agency and autonomy, a more comprehensive understanding of women's empowerment can be achieved. This shift would not only reflect the complex realities of women in Nepal but also inform more effective policy interventions aimed at promoting gender equality across all segments of society.

By overlooking factors such as caste, ethnicity, and socio-economic status, these measurement tools fail to capture the systemic barriers that shape women's political

participation and empowerment (Shrestha & Lama, 2020). In the context of Nepal, women from marginalized groups—such as Dalits and indigenous communities—face compounded challenges that hinder their political engagement and empowerment. These challenges are not merely additive; they interact in ways that exacerbate inequalities, limiting the capacity of these women to influence political processes (Jha, 2020).

Women may occupy positions of power, but their ability to advocate for policies that reflect their needs can be severely limited by prevailing social norms and structural inequalities (Dahal, 2021). For instance, while Nepal has made strides in increasing women's representation in local governments, the actual decision-making power of these women often remains constrained by patriarchal attitudes and discriminatory practices (Acharya & Luitel, 2019). Furthermore, by understanding the unique barriers faced by different groups of women, policymakers can craft targeted interventions that address specific challenges rather than applying a one-size-fits-all solution (Mahmood, 2019). This tailored approach fosters inclusivity, ensuring that policies not only promote gender equality but also consider the diverse identities and experiences of women.

By integrating the complexities of gender, caste, ethnicity, and socio-economic status into measurement frameworks, we can gain a more accurate understanding of the realities faced by women. This approach not only enriches the discourse on women's empowerment but also informs the development of policies that address the issues of women empowerment. Crenshaw (1989) posits that understanding the interactions between various forms of discrimination—such as those based on race, gender, and class—is essential for developing effective policies that address the unique challenges faced by marginalized groups. The women may be legally represented in political structures, their ability to influence decision-making is often curtailed by systemic inequalities and cultural norms (Jha, 2020).

Additionally, an intersectional approach allows for a more crucial exploration of women's agency and participation. For example, Collins (2000) argues that measuring empowerment should extend beyond numerical representation to include the qualitative dimensions of women's political experiences. This perspective highlights that many women, especially those from marginalized backgrounds, encounter barriers that limit their participation, including lack of access to resources, societal stigma, and political marginalization (Acharya & Luitel, 2019). By incorporating intersectional frameworks, policymakers can better understand the distinct barriers faced by different groups of women and, consequently, design more targeted interventions that enhance their political participation (Dahal, 2021). This comprehensive approach not only promotes inclusivity but also enriches the

discourse on women's empowerment, ensuring that the voices of all women, particularly from marginalized communities.

4. Critical Reflection

This study reveals that GEM on national averages, fails to address the systemic inequalities that marginalized groups such as Dalits, indigenous women, and those from rural areas face. These findings align with prior critiques, including those by Kabeer (2005), who argue that GEM's reliance on quantitative metrics cannot adequately capture the socio-cultural barriers that affect women's political empowerment, such as patriarchy and caste-based discrimination (Jha, 2020).

The constitutional provisions for representing 33 percent women in legislative bodies remains challenging. Women from the Dalit and Madhesi communities continue to face caste-based and socio-cultural discrimination, which restricts their political participation and decision-making power (Rai, 2018). This study's cross-sectional analysis confirms that while GEM provides a macro-level understanding of gender disparity, it overlooks the micro-level experiences of women in different socio-cultural contexts. Bhandari (2021) also highlights this discrepancy, noting that GEM's inability to incorporate intersectionality limits its effectiveness in addressing the specific needs of disadvantaged women in Nepal.

A significant observation from the analysis is the role of entrenched gender stereotypes, which further inhibit women's empowerment in Nepal. As noted by K.C., Pasa, and Khatri (2022), gender stereotypes that define Nepali women's roles as primarily domestic and caregiving reinforce systemic inequalities. Women in Nepal often face expectations to prioritize household duties over public and political roles, a factor not adequately captured by GEM. These gender norms contribute to the limited agency and autonomy of women, especially those from marginalized communities. More so, the research highlights that vocational education and training play a critical role in empowering women, particularly in rural areas. Garbuja and Pasa (2020) emphasize that access to vocational skills enable women to participate in economic and political spheres. The study indicates that incorporating such qualitative dimensions—education, skills, and agency—into alternative measurement frameworks would offer a more meticulous understanding of women's empowerment beyond GEM's quantitative focus.

The intersectional approach employed in this study allows for the simultaneous analysis of various intersecting factors, shedding light on the diverse challenges facing by Nepalese women. Therefore, importance of incorporating intersectionality and addressing socio-cultural barriers to develop more inclusive policies helped to

empower women. In doing so, it helps to raise voices of women, including those from disadvantaged communities (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 2000).

5. Conclusion

This study advocates for a shift from traditional frameworks like the GEM to intersectional approaches in assessing women's empowerment in Nepal. By combining both quantitative and qualitative data, the research highlights how caste, ethnicity, and socio-economic status intersect to shape women's political participation. It underscores that while GEM provides useful national averages, it fails to capture the unique challenges faced by marginalized groups, such as Dalits and indigenous communities. An intersectional perspective is essential for crafting targeted, inclusive policies that address the compounded discrimination these women face, ultimately fostering more equitable political engagement and empowerment.

6. Policy Implications

This study highlights the need for a shift from the traditional GEM to intersectional frameworks in assessing women's political empowerment. Policymakers should adopt cross-sectional approaches that capture both quantitative and qualitative data to understand the specific barriers faced by marginalized women, particularly Dalits and indigenous communities. Alternative frameworks like the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) or the Gender Inequality Index (GII) provide a more comprehensive view of empowerment. Integrating an intersectional approach may help create inclusive policies that address the unique challenges and promote the active political participation of women in Nepal.

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