

Employment and Empowerment: Assessing Changing Status of Dalit Women in Chadani Village, Mahakali Municipality ----- By Kapadi, P.R.

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Abstract

Employment is recognized as a critical pathway for women's empowerment, yet its potential is often circumscribed by systemic barriers. This is particularly true for Dalit women in Nepal, who face the compounded burdens of gender and caste-based discrimination. This study investigates the nexus between economic participation and the empowerment of Dalit women, using a case study of Chadani Village in Mahakali Municipality. Based on a mixed-methods approach, data were collected from 50 households (25 employed and 25 unemployed Dalit women) through structured questionnaires. The findings reveal that despite a progressive national policy framework, a significant implementation gap persists. Deep-rooted discriminatory practices, illiteracy, and hierarchical cultural norms continue to limit access to health, education, and formal economic opportunities. However, the study demonstrates a clear correlation between employment and enhanced status. Employed women, especially those in government service, exhibited greater confidence, decision-making autonomy within the household, and higher social participation compared to their unemployed counterparts. The research concludes that while economic independence is a crucial catalyst for empowerment, it must be supported by a multi-faceted approach. Effective implementation of existing policies, community-based awareness campaigns, legal reforms to abolish discriminatory practices, and initiatives promoting shared domestic responsibilities are essential. Ultimately, transformative change requires empowering Dalit women economically, socially, and politically to overcome entrenched marginalization.

Keywords: Caste-based Discrimination, Dalit Women, Employment, Empowerment, Social Participation

Introduction

Globally, employment is recognized as a critical pathway for women's empowerment, enabling economic independence, enhancing decision-making autonomy, and challenging entrenched gender hierarchies. However, this potential is often circumscribed by systemic barriers, particularly for those at the intersection of multiple marginalities. In the South Asian context, Dalit women epitomize this struggle, facing the compounded burdens of gender and caste-based discrimination, which severely limit their access to education and formal economic opportunities, often confining them to exploitative and informal labor (Sabharwal & Sonalkar, 2015; Thapar-Bjorkert et al., 2019).

This reality is starkly evident in Nepal, where, despite a progressive policy framework established since the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action, including constitutional mandates for inclusion and gender-responsive budgeting, a significant implementation gap persists. Historically, women's contributions to socio-economic progress have been constrained by low literacy rates and profound underrepresentation in the formal workforce; as late as 1982, women constituted a mere 7 percent of gazetted officers and 5 percent of supporting staff in government service (UNICEF, 1990). The situation for Dalit women is even more acute, as they navigate not only patriarchal norms but also deep-seated caste-based exclusion, which impacts every dimension of empowerment—social, economic, and political (Bhattarai, 2009; Kapadi, 2019).

The caste system, dividing society into hierarchical groups, placed Dalits (formerly "untouchables") at the bottom, subjecting them to severe social, economic, and political exclusion (NDC, 2018). Dalit women, thus, experienced extreme deprivation, with low literacy, poor health outcomes, and confinement to traditional, low-status occupations like wage labor and caste-based work such as tailoring and blacksmithing (Sharma et al., 1994 cited in Dangal, 2005). Their contributions to household and farm economies remained unrecognized, and they had negligible decision-making power at any level. Untouchability is in mind of elites not in any authentic scriptures (Badal, 2020).

The restoration of democracy in 1990 and Nepal's ratification of international conventions like the Beijing Platform for Action (1995) marked a turning point. This led to the establishment of national mechanisms for gender equality, such as the Ministry of Women and Social Welfare (1995) and the National Women's Commission (2002). The Interim Constitution of 2007 explicitly prohibited

gender and caste-based discrimination and promoted inclusive policies. During this period, the concept of women's empowerment gained prominence, defined through three dimensions: social (education, health), economic (resource control, income), and political (participation, decision-making) (Bhattarai, 2009). Despite these advances, implementation gaps persisted. Women's participation in formal employment remained low—exemplified by women holding only 7 percent of gazetted officer posts in the 1980s (UNICEF, 1990)—and Dalit women continued to face systemic barriers, with acute landlessness and poverty in communities like those in Chadani village (Bennett et al., 2013; Dahal et al., 2002). Besides, changing status of Dalit women through employment must be understood through the dual lens of shifting gender norms and persistent caste-based discrimination, where economic gains can be offset by enduring social shocks and stigmatization (Pasa & Thapa, 2025).

Therefore, this study assesses changing status of Dalit women in Chadani village, Mahakali municipality. The 2015 Constitution further institutionalized proportional inclusion and rights for women and marginalized groups. Policies like the Local Self-Governance Act (1999) and gender-responsive budgeting guidelines mandated allocating resources for women's empowerment at the local level. Consequently, some Dalit women have begun moving beyond traditional roles, engaging in employment beyond household chores. This research investigates this critical juncture by comparing employed and non-employed Dalit women to assess whether economic participation leads to tangible empowerment. It aims to critically assess whether and how employment serves as a catalyst for transformative change in their social standing, household decision-making, and overall empowerment, moving beyond policy rhetoric to examine the lived experiences within a specific socio-cultural landscape.

Contemporary Dynamics, Theoretical Insights and Research Focus

Nepal's policy framework for women's empowerment has evolved significantly since the 1990s, establishing a comprehensive institutional architecture. This began with the ratification of the Beijing Platform for Action in 1995, which led to the creation of high-level bodies like the Ministry of Women and Social Welfare and the National Women's Commission, alongside mechanisms like Gender Focal Points to mainstream gender across government. The commitment was further solidified in subsequent constitutional and legal reforms; and the Constitution of Nepal 2015 enshrined principles of non-discrimination, proportional inclusion, and specific rights for women

in property and political representation (Interim Constitution of Nepal, 2007; Constitution of Nepal, 2015). Operationally, the Local Self-Governance Act (1999) and related guidelines mandated participatory planning and directed a significant portion of local capital budgets—at least 10 percent specifically—toward women's empowerment programs, aiming to decentralize and target these efforts effectively (LSGA, 1999; Local Bodies' Resource Mobilization Guideline, 2013). Despite these ambitious policy, legal, and budgetary efforts, the review concludes that the outcomes regarding the political, economic, and social empowerment of women have remained inadequate in both coverage and quality, indicating a persistent gap between policy intent and tangible impact on the ground.

Theoretically, concepts of social inclusion and women empowerment provide a critical framework for analyzing the status of Dalit women in Nepal. Social inclusion theory, as discussed by Shrestha (2002) and Thapa (2003), highlights the systemic discrimination and exclusion of women from identity, property, political power, and public life, establishing their position as second-class citizens. Complementing this, women empowerment theory, as outlined by Bhattarai (2009), offers a multidimensional pathway to address this exclusion through social, economic, and political empowerment. This framework posits that empowerment is achieved through interrelated indicators like education, control over resources, and decision-making participation, which are essential for marginalized women to realize their inherent potential and enact transformative change in their families and communities. Together, these theories establish a foundation for analyzing both the oppressive structures and the potential avenues for liberation and advancement for Dalit women.

Empirically, Sabharwal and Sonalkar (2015) demonstrate that Dalit women in India are often confined to the most exploitative and low-paying jobs, which may reinforce rather than dismantle existing hierarchies. This critical view is supported by Thapar-Björkert et al. (2019), who argue for understanding empowerment as a nuanced process rather than a simple outcome of employment. Their study of India's employment guarantee scheme suggests that while such programs provide economic resources, their success in fostering genuine empowerment for Dalit women and men depends on the implementation context and the ability to challenge deep-seated social norms.

The role of globalization is similarly double-edged. Kumar (2001) highlights that globalization has created new economic opportunities for some Dalits, potentially leading to a degree of

empowerment. However, this has often been accompanied by a violent backlash from dominant castes seeking to preserve their status, leading to increased atrocities against Dalits, particularly women. This indicates that economic changes do not automatically translate into social acceptance or safety. Several papers point to specific domains where change is occurring but faces significant challenges. Rai (2016) and Brahmanandam (n.d.) overview the persistently low status of Dalit women, noting that while legal and political measures exist (e.g., reservations), their impact is limited by poor implementation and pervasive social discrimination. Chandramani and Padhi (2025) further explore the resilience required to navigate these overlapping systems of discrimination, identifying sexual violence as a primary barrier. Focusing on education, Chaurasiya (2017) identifies it as a crucial tool for empowerment but notes that Dalit girls continue to face immense barriers to accessing and completing their schooling.

Singh (2012) introduces a critical psychological dimension, examining how public works employment, while providing income, can also expose Dalit women to shaming and reinforce social exclusion, questioning the very "cost of empowerment." Collectively, these studies paint a picture of slow, contested progress, where every advancement in employment or rights is mediated by the enduring power of caste and patriarchy. Chandvankar (2021) offers a critical perspective by analyzing Dalit women's roles in sanitation labor. This study is crucial for understanding how traditional caste-based occupations can persist in modern municipal forms, potentially limiting genuine empowerment despite providing wages. This research warns that not all employment leads to upward mobility; some work may reinforce social stigma, a key consideration when assessing "changing status" in your own findings. Tamata et al. (2023) investigate the changing role of Dalit women in local governance and community institutions. Their work suggests that employment can be a catalyst for broader public participation, leading to increased visibility and a stronger voice in community affairs.

Pandey (2024) addresses a fundamental structural barrier by exploring Madheshi Dalit women's access to citizenship. This article reminds us that without legal identity, women's ability to secure formal employment, own property, or access state resources is severely hindered. This structural constraint is a critical external factor that may shape the opportunities and outcomes for the women in your case study, even at the local level.

Despite progressive policies, a clear research gap exists in understanding how employment translates into tangible empowerment for Dalit women in rural Nepal. Existing studies highlight

their overall marginalization but lack a specific, comparative analysis of the differences between employed and non-employed Dalit women. This study will fill this gap by empirically investigating whether and how wage-earning enhances their decision-making power, economic control, and social status within the household and community, thereby assessing the real-world impact of economic participation against persistent patriarchal and caste-based barriers.

Objectives and Methodology

This study aims to examine the socio-economic status of Dalit households, assess Dalit women's role in family livelihoods, and analyze their changing social status. This study employed a quantitative case study research design (Yin, 2018) to investigate the changing status of Dalit women in Chadani Village, Mahakali Municipality. Out of total 366 Dalit households, stratified purposive sampling technique was used to select 50 Dalit households, comprising 25 with employed women and 25 with non-employed women, ensuring representation from various employment sectors. Primary data were collected through a structured questionnaire survey administered to respondents aged 20-60 years. The collected data were processed, hand-tabulated, and analyzed using simple statistical tools such as percentages and ratios, with results presented through graphs and diagrams to facilitate a comparative analysis of the socio-economic roles and status of employed versus non-employed Dalit women.

Findings: Social and Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

The socio-economic status of a particular community, society and a geographical locality and different socio-economic characteristics represent the different socio-cultural norms, values and traditional of the society which have been carrying a community, society or a geographical area with a guidance of certain ethics and system approaches. In this research study, the researcher is being focused on women in it does inter connection with the employed and unemployed women. So, have the comparative study between employed and non-employed of the respondents are explored to inter connect women of Chadani, Mahakali Municipality.

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Profile of Survey Respondents

Category	Response	Employed Women (n=25)	Unemployed Women (n=25)	Total (n=50)
Age Group	20-30 years	6 (24%)	4 (16%)	10 (20%)

	31-40 years	12 (48%)	10 (40%)	22 (44%)
	41-50 years	5 (20%)	6 (24%)	11 (22%)
	51-60 years	2 (8%)	3 (12%)	5 (10%)
	60+ years	0 (0%)	2 (8%)	2 (4%)
Marital Status	Married	17 (68%)	16 (64%)	33 (66%)
	Unmarried	5 (20%)	2 (8%)	7 (14%)
	Widowed	2 (8%)	7 (28%)	9 (18%)
	Separated	1 (4%)	0 (0%)	1 (2%)
Education	Illiterate	0 (0%)	12 (48%)	12 (24%)
Level	Primary	8 (32%)	8 (32%)	16 (32%)
	Secondary	12 (48%)	2 (8%)	14 (28%)
	+2/ Intermediate	3 (12%)	3 (12%)	6 (12%)
	Bachelor or Above	2 (8%)	0 (0%)	2 (4%)
Caste/Ethnicity	Luhar	16 (64%)	5 (20%)	21 (42%)
	Sunar	3 (12%)	11 (44%)	14 (28%)
	Kami	4 (16%)	3 (12%)	7 (14%)
	Baadi	1 (4%)	3 (12%)	4 (8%)
	Sarki	0 (0%)	2 (8%)	2 (4%)
	Nepali	1 (4%)	1 (4%)	2 (4%)
Family	Nuclear Family	14 (56%)	10 (40%)	24 (48%)
Structure	Joint Family	11 (44%)	15 (60%)	26 (52%)

(Data Collection)

Table 1 presents characteristics of the respondents (25 employed and 25 unemployed women) reveals distinct socio-demographic patterns. The majority of respondents (44%) were aged 31-40, and most were married (66%). A critical difference is observed in educational attainment: no employed women were illiterate, compared to 48 percent of unemployed women, and nearly half (48%) of employed women had a secondary-level education. Ethnically, the Luhar group was most prevalent (42% of total respondents), and they constituted a much larger share of the employed women (64%) compared to the unemployed group (20%). The family structure was nearly evenly split between nuclear (48%) and joint (52%) families, with a slightly higher tendency for unemployed women to live in joint families.

Economic Status of the Respondents

Women’s economic aspect refers to their access over resources, earning capacity and work in which they engage. It has been already mentioned that social aspect and economic aspect of the women have direct relationship to their status in the household and in the community. There are lots of factor, which are affecting the economic condition of women. The researcher has tried to know the economic aspect of women taking the following economic factors into consideration. Women whose economic aspect is sound may support their family by the help of their earning than whose economic aspect is weak.

Table 2: Economic Status of the Respondents

Economic Factor	Key Findings	Implications for Women's Status
Occupational Status	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Employed Women: Mainly in Service (44%) and Business (12%).Unemployed Women: Mainly in Agriculture (30%) and Wage Earning (24%). A woman with a sound occupation has higher status and greater decision-making rights.	Formal employment (service/business) is associated with higher social status and greater influence within the family compared to traditional or informal work.
Land Ownership	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Male Landowners: 62% of all respondents.Female Landowners: Employed women (24%) were twice as likely to own land as unemployed women (12%).	Land ownership is a key determinant of status. Economic contribution (employment) appears to be linked to a woman's ability to acquire assets like land.
Livestock Population	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Ducks and Pigs were the most common livestock.	Livestock is a common economic asset, but the type (e.g., ducks/pigs vs.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The total livestock population was similar between employed (24) and unemployed (25) women's households.	buffalo/cows) may indicate different farming practices in the study area.
Family Income	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• High Income (NPR 100,000+): Exclusive to households with employed women (26%).• Low Income (NPR 10,000-50,000): Exclusive to households with unemployed women (42%).• Employed women directly contribute to significantly higher household earnings.	A woman's personal income is a major factor in elevating the family's overall economic condition, which in turn strengthens her social and decision-making status.

(Data collection)

Table 2 examined factors like occupation, land ownership, livestock, and family income. It found that employed women were primarily in service (44%) and business (12%) sectors, while unemployed women were mostly in agriculture (30%) and wage labor (24%). Economically active women had significantly higher rates of land ownership (24% vs. 12% for unemployed women) and contributed to much higher family incomes, with 26 percent of employed women's households earning above NPR 100,000 monthly. This financial contribution strengthens their decision-making power and status within the household and community, confirming that a sound economic aspect directly enhances a woman's social standing and capacity to support her family. The data strongly supports that active economic participation, particularly in formal sectors, directly improves a woman's economic aspect (resource control, earnings) and thereby elevates her status in the household and community. Pasa and Dwivedy (2023) also found that new employment opportunities offers pathways to economic independence and empowerment of Dalit women in Simardahi Village of Matihani Municipality.

Changing Role and Status of the Women

The economic and social status of women is a critical determinant of household welfare and community development. This is particularly evident in regions like Kanchanpur district, Nepal, where women's empowerment is shaped by a complex interplay of economic participation, asset ownership, and deeply entrenched social roles. While women predominantly bear the

responsibility for reproductive and household tasks, their active engagement in occupations, ownership of land, and control over livestock and income directly correlates with their decision-making power and status within the family and the broader community. Furthermore, the landscape of women's influence is expanding beyond the household through participation in community-based organizations and, most significantly, through political empowerment facilitated by constitutional measures. This report, drawing on field surveys, examines the multifaceted aspects of women's lives—from their economic conditions and domestic burdens to their organizational involvement and political representation—to provide a comprehensive analysis of the factors that both constrain and enhance their agency and overall status.

Table 3: Changing Role and Status of the Women

Aspect	of Key Findings	Challenges & Observations
Participation		
Household Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Women bear the primary burden (90-100%) for key tasks like preparing food, water collection, and family care. Men have a minimal role (0-10% as primary responsible). 	The heavy domestic workload is a major barrier to women's participation in community and organizational activities.
Community Organization Involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participation in CBOs is mixed, with involvement in groups like Dhukuti (26%) and Cooperatives (4%). Overall participation is described as "not very satisfactory." 	Many women are only general members (44%), with fewer in committee (30%) or executive (26%) roles, indicating limited leadership.
Reasons for Non-Participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The main reason for not participating in community activities is being burdened by household work (9.59% of all respondents). A small percentage cite male participation as a barrier. 	Employed women face slightly fewer barriers (25% non-participation) than non-employed women (10.5% non-participation).
Political Empowerment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A landmark achievement: 10 Dalit women were elected to ward 	This demonstrates the effective upliftment of

	positions in the local municipality, a direct outcome of constitutional provisions like 33% reservation.	marginalized women into formal political power, enabling them to influence community development.
Decision-Making & Livelihood	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Households where decisions are made jointly by the respondent and her husband show the highest livelihood experience index (0.68). 	There is a link between women's involvement in decision-making and improved household welfare, with variations between Dalit and non-Dalit communities.

(Data Collection)

Table 3 highlights significant trends in women's organizational and political participation, albeit with challenges. While women are increasingly aware of their rights and are forming groups to fight discrimination, their active involvement is often hindered by heavy domestic burdens—with women bearing primary responsibility for all household chores—and by lower educational levels, which limit many to mere membership rather than leadership roles. Dalit women, in particular, face lower participation rates in community organizations compared to non-Dalit women. However, a major political breakthrough is evident: following the 2015 constitution, 10 Dalit women were elected to local office in Mahakali municipality, showcasing a vibrant shift towards political empowerment. This suggests that despite domestic and social barriers, targeted policies like 33 percent reservation can effectively elevate women, especially from marginalized communities, into significant decision-making positions. Women's participation is constrained by deep-rooted gender roles in household chores and educational gaps. However, proactive policies like political reservation can successfully overcome these barriers, leading to the substantial political empowerment of even the most marginalized women and positively impacting household well-being. Women's participation is constrained by deep-rooted gender roles in household chores and educational gaps. However, proactive policies like political reservation can successfully overcome these barriers, leading to the substantial political empowerment of even the most marginalized women and positively impacting household well-being.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

Women empowerment in Nepal has seen progress. Discriminatory practices rooted in social norms and traditions persist, limiting their advancement. The study clearly demonstrates that economic independence is a critical catalyst for improving women's status. Employed women, particularly those in government service, exhibit greater confidence, enjoy more freedom, and their opinions are more valued in household decisions compared to unemployed women. This underscores that education, employment, and economic self-sufficiency are foundational for women to strengthen their position politically, financially, and socially, both within the household and the wider community.

Finally, for addressing these challenges, a multi-faceted approach is required. Government and non-governmental organizations must move beyond ratifying treaties to ensuring their effective implementation. Key policy priorities include: eliminating gender discrimination through legal reforms and community awareness campaigns; increasing women's access to gainful employment and higher education; and actively encouraging political participation through measures like increased reservation. Furthermore, interventions should promote shared responsibility for household chores, provide vocational training and income-generating programs, and fundamentally reform or abolish laws and customs that hinder the establishment of genuine equality between men and women.

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