



Article

Gendered Challenges in Nepal's TVET Sector: A Narrative Inquiry of Women Instructors

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Abstract

In spite of increasing research on gender and education in Nepal, there is a meager literature on how women instructors in the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) sector narrate their lived professional experiences. This paper explores the lived experiences of four women instructors working in the TVET institutions in Nepal. The study focuses on how these four instructors share the personal account and make sense of their professional journeys, including the challenges they face, the strategies they use to overcome barriers, and the opportunities they create within their institutions. Using a narrative inquiry as the research method and working within an interpretive research paradigm, the study draws on in-depth interviews and field notes from four women instructors. The feminist theory and cultural capital theory are applied to explain how gender roles and cultural experiences influence teaching practices and leadership development. The findings reveal that each woman's story is shaped by her unique socio-cultural background, psychological resilience and professional growth. Despite facing male dominance, gender bias, and limited institutional support, the instructors show strong leadership, adaptability and commitment to quality education. Their experiences highlight the importance of participatory leadership, self-reflection, content expertise and culturally responsive teaching. The study concludes that women instructors play a vital role in shaping inclusive and productive learning environments and their voices must be recognized for the betterment of TVET in Nepal.

Keywords: instructors, TVET, gender equality, workplace challenges, professional development

Introduction

This article aims to explore the lived experiences of women instructors from the TVET sector, focusing on the challenges they face, their job satisfaction, behavior, and the social constraints they navigate daily. Despite significant contributions, women's roles in technical education

are often marginalized due to prevailing gender stereotypes, male dominance in the workplace and at TVET institutions, and the lack of institutional support. The participation of women in the TVET sector in Nepal has increased over recent years, but their professional experiences continue to

be shaped by systemic barriers and societal expectations.

The motivation for this research stems from my personal and professional experience working as an Administrative Officer Third and Second Level at the Council for Technical Education and Vocational Training (CTEVT), the apex body of TVET in Nepal. Over ten years, I visited multiple institutions across the country and interviewed women instructors, who often face challenges not only within the classroom but also in the institutional and societal structures. These experiences inspired me to further investigate the realities of women instructors in Nepal's TVET system.

Women constitute nearly half of Nepal's population and play a vital role in every dimension of national development, including education, economy and family (Paudel, 2019). However, their participation in the technical fields has traditionally been limited due to the perception that such fields are more suited to men (Bhandari, 2013). Technical and engineering programs were once centered around physically demanding jobs in industrial sectors, which discouraged women from participating (Lamichhane, 2011). Today, advancements in technology have made these roles more inclusive and less physically intensive, opening doors for more women to enter the sector (Mustapha, 2016). Despite these developments, societal norms continue to dictate gender roles, discouraging women from pursuing careers in engineering, construction and other technical areas that require fieldwork. In this

context, I attempted to explore how women instructors narrated their experiences as instructors in the TVET sector.

Women as Employees in Nepal

Women in Nepal, as in many parts of the world, shoulder a triple burden of caregiving, household work, and paid employment (Upadhyay-Dhungel & Dhungel, 2013). Despite contributing significantly to household and economic activities, caregiving and domestic work are not recognized as productive labor. This often results in women spending more hours on household tasks than that of men, limiting their opportunities for full-time formal employment. Furthermore, entrenched patriarchal attitudes impede women's empowerment, thus restricting their access to better economic opportunities and contributing to a low participation rate in the formal economy. Women in Nepal are therefore more likely to be found in informal employment as shown by Baidya et al. (2003), who noted that women face significant barriers to entering the formal labor force.

According to the Labor Force Survey (2019), the overall employment rate for women in Nepal is 22.9%, with 32.3% employed in the informal sector and 32.9% in the formal sector. Despite having a higher working-age population, for every 100 employed men, only 59 women are employed (Ministry of Finance [MOF], 2019). The gender disparity is also evident in the education sector, where 43.7% of women work as primary

school instructors, while only 19.8% work at the secondary school level. In the CTEVT institutions, women account for only 9% of technical instructors, which further exposes the underrepresentation of women in higher-paying and skilled positions.

The societal views on women's roles remain deeply rooted in traditional norms. Women are often seen as subordinate to men and their primary responsibility is considered to be family care (Acharya, 2004). Even educated and employed women are expected to prioritize family over career, and their decisions are frequently made by male family members (Acharya et al., 2010). This is compounded by the fact that a woman's role in the household and society is largely dictated by male authority. Acharya and Robinson-Pant (2019) argue that irrespective of higher education, women's positions in society remain largely unchanged. They are still expected to submit to the traditional family roles, regardless of their professional success. This lack of economic independence and societal support often leaves women without the autonomy to make important life decisions.

Moreover, cultural practices further exacerbate gender inequality. Bhusal (2008) highlights how societal roles and status are assigned based on gender, with women expected to fulfill roles prescribed by men. This is also reflected in practices like eating from the same plate after it is used by their husbands, a symbolic act reinforcing subordination (Thapa, 2007). These cultural

expectations create significant barriers to women's education and participation in the workforce.

Despite these challenges, Nepal has made strides toward promoting women's rights and employment. The Constitution of Nepal (2015) guarantees equal employment rights for all citizens, irrespective of gender, and prohibits discrimination based on gender (Articles 33, 34, and 38). However, Armstrong (2017) points out that various structural barriers, such as regional and gender discrimination, hinder women from fully benefiting from these legal provisions. Furthermore, the government of Nepal has recognized the importance of women's education and employment as key components of economic development. The National Employment Policy (2014) emphasizes the need for productive employment to reduce poverty and unemployment, while the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 5, a focus on achieving gender equality and women's empowerment (National Planning Commission [NPC], 2017).

In recent years, there is an increasing focus on promoting gender equality, women's empowerment, and social inclusion in Nepal's national development plans. The 16th Plan (2024/25-2028/29) of Nepal prioritizes these issues, and the National Educational Policy (2019) highlights the need for capacity building of women instructors in TVET. These policies aim to enhance women's participation in the workforce and promote their professional development.

Although significant progress is witnessed, the condition of women in Nepal remains far from ideal. Violence, discrimination, and inequality persist, making it clear that substantial work is needed to achieve true gender equality in employment and beyond (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2025).

Research Method

Data collection involved conducting in-depth interviews with four women instructors, two from CTEVT constituted institution and two others from affiliated institutions in the Kathmandu Valley. The Kathmandu Valley was chosen for easy accessibility and institutional concentration. The participants were from engineering stream and chosen purposively, with a focus on those having more than five years of professional experience in the TVET sector. Fieldwork included multiple interviews and the taking of field notes, which were later transcribed, translated and coded. The research also took into account Creswell's (2013) guidelines for narrative inquiry, ensuring that the data were analyzed for the unfolding events, turning points and the participants' critical insight.

Quality standards in qualitative research were carefully maintained throughout the study. These included ensuring credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Credibility was achieved through prolonged engagement and member checking with the participants, while dependability was ensured by using an open-ended inquiry process.

Transferability was addressed by providing a detailed description of the research context, and conformability was maintained by ensuring that the findings were grounded in the participants' stories and experiences.

Ethical considerations were an essential aspect of the study, with a strong emphasis on maintaining confidentiality and respecting the privacy of participants. To ensure confidentiality and protect the identities of participants, all instructors' names presented in this study are pseudonyms. Additionally, the research was conducted in accordance with the cultural norms and values of the participants, taking into account gender, caste and ethnicity to avoid misinterpretation or harm (Warusznski, 2002).

Thematic Findings

Theme 1: Gendered Responsibilities and Dual Burdens

One of the most recurring and significant themes that emerged from the narratives of all four women instructors is the gendered responsibility placed upon them and the dual burden of balancing professional duties with household expectations. Despite their achievements and commitment to teaching, each instructor shared the emotional and physical toll of managing both spheres in a society where traditional gender roles are deeply rooted.

Sabitra reflected on her struggles by highlighting how societal expectations made her journey as a working woman more complex. *“Even with a supportive family,*

I found it difficult to balance home duties with work,” she said, illustrating the heavy load placed on women by cultural norms. She emphasized that women must prove themselves constantly in environments where male dominance is normalized. Yet, she stayed determined, believing that women have unique strengths like dedication, passion and cooperation.

Similarly, Mamata shared the emotional burden of working under societal pressure and stereotypes *“Women are often underestimated, and our leadership is not fully accepted”* she said. The dual expectations placed on her as an instructor and as a woman in society created ongoing challenges. Despite this, she continued, *“Teaching is not just a job for me; it’s about mentoring and guiding”* which shows her deep commitment to her role despite systemic barriers.

Puja too felt the impact of gender roles, especially within institutional settings. *“Teaching is manageable”* she said, *“but I struggle with team dynamics and administrative tasks where women are often excluded.”* Her experience reflects how institutional structures can compound the pressure women face, as they juggle both professional aspirations and the responsibilities society assigns to them at home. She advocated for a better environment, stating, *“A woman-friendly institution is essential for true success.”*

Diksha’s narrative was especially powerful in describing the emotional and social toll

of the dual burden. *“Teaching was initially a compulsion,”* she admitted, *“but over time, it became an opportunity for growth.”* However, this growth came at a cost. She added, *“The demanding dual responsibilities of work and household chores make it difficult, yet I strive to improve education in my institution.”* Diksha also highlighted the emotional pressure, saying, *“Societal norms and psychological stress make it hard to be seen and heard as a woman instructor.”*

Together, these narratives portray how gendered roles and the dual burdens of work and home present persistent challenges for women instructors. Their voices echo a collective struggle - yet also reflect resilience, commitment and a desire to lead and transform the TVET landscape in Nepal. Their strength lies not just in enduring these dual responsibilities but in turning them into sources of motivation for institutional and personal growth.

Theme 2: Institutional Discrimination and Lack of Representation

Another prominent theme that emerged from the stories of all four instructors is the institutional discrimination they faced and the underrepresentation of women in leadership and decision-making roles. Despite their qualifications, commitment and experience, these women instructors have often found themselves sidelined in the institutional structures dominated by men.

Sabitra expressed frustration with the male-centric environment of her institution. *“I faced challenges, especially due to male*

dominance and gender bias” she recalled. Her journey reflects how deeply rooted patriarchal attitudes within institutions hinder women’s professional visibility. She added, *“Women can be as successful as men if given equal opportunities”* indicating that it is not a matter of capability but of access and fairness.

Mamata also encountered resistance in asserting her role, *“Women instructors are often underestimated, and their leadership is not fully accepted”* she stated, pointing to the subtle and overt ways in which institutions reinforce male superiority. She further explained, *“Even when women contribute meaningfully, we are not always given space at the decision-making table.”* Her voice stresses the urgency of recognizing women’s potential and not just their presence.

Puja, despite her nine years of experience, continued to feel left out of important processes within her institution. *“Women are often excluded from decision-making”* she said bluntly. Her experience highlighted how formal policies might appear gender-neutral, but practices often remain biased. Puja believed strongly that women are equally capable of leadership and teaching, but the institutional culture is yet to fully embrace this truth.

Diksha offered a deeply personal account of institutional neglect and discrimination. *“I faced resistance, particularly in the male-dominated Management Committee”* she recalled. Despite her dedication to improving education, she found herself

struggling against a system that failed to support her. She noted, *“There is a dearth of representation and inadequate support from management”* pointing to a structural flaw that prevents women from advancing and influencing policy.

Across all four stories, there is a shared reality: institutional systems that are slow to accept women in leadership and often reluctant to offer them meaningful representation. Despite working hard, showing results, and building trust among students, these instructors remain underrepresented in key decision-making spaces.

This theme highlights the urgent need for institutional reforms that go beyond symbolic inclusion and offer women real power, participation and voice. The stories of Sabitra, Mamata, Puja and Diksha show that women are not just willing but ready to lead - what’s missing is the institutional will to support and recognize them.

Theme 3: Commitment to and Vision for Change

Although they are facing societal norms, institutional barriers, and gender bias, all four women instructors demonstrated a strong commitment to change and a clear vision for a more inclusive, empowering educational environment. Their stories are not only about overcoming obstacles but also about proactively shaping the future of technical and vocational education in Nepal.

Sabitra showed unwavering dedication to her role and to improving the system she

worked within. She expressed a deep sense of purpose: *“I was determined to succeed, believing that women have unique strengths like dedication, passion, and cooperation.”* Her belief in the transformative potential of women in education reflects a vision where gender equity is not only possible but necessary. She emphasized, *“Women can be as successful as men if they are given equal opportunities”* pointing to a future where fairness is central to institutional growth.

Mamata's narrative reveals her inner drive to not only survive but also empower others. She noted, *“I have actively empowered my students and contributed to the institution”* positioning herself as a change maker. She believes change comes from within, stating, *“Though often seen as less commanding, women bring emotional intelligence, transparency and dedication to their roles.”* Mamata's approach to teaching as “more than a job” underscores her long-term vision of mentorship, leadership and institutional transformation.

Puja was vocal about the need for structural and cultural shifts in her institution. *“I constantly sought professional growth through collaboration and technology”* she said, highlighting her forward-thinking attitude. Despite being in a system that often excludes women, she pushed boundaries, adding, *“I believe that women, although often undervalued, are equally capable of leadership and teaching.”* Her advocacy for a “women-friendly environment” shows a strong commitment to creating inclusive

spaces where women can thrive and lead.

Diksha's story is a testament to resilience and visionary thinking under pressure. Although she entered teaching as a necessity, her mindset evolved over time. *“It became an opportunity for personal and professional development”* she said. Diksha turned challenges into motivation, working hard to “promote change” even in a resistant environment. Her vision extended beyond herself: *“There is a need for more opportunities for professional development, especially for women in rural areas.”* Her forward-looking views demonstrate a deep understanding of systemic inequality and a clear roadmap for empowerment.

Together, these instructors are not only surviving within difficult systems, but they are committed to reforming them. Their shared vision incorporates more inclusive leadership, equitable opportunities, and empowered students and instructors alike. Through innovation, collaboration and an unyielding belief in their purpose, these women are already agents of change, paving the way for a more just and effective TVET system in Nepal.

Discussion

Intersections of Gender, Culture, and Professional Identity

The findings underscore the complex interplay between gender norms, cultural expectations and professional identity construction among women instructors in TVET. While all participants valued their roles as educators and were committed to

their students, their narratives reveal how societal beliefs about femininity shape their daily experiences. The cultural expectation that women are primarily responsible for household management creates a double burden that impacts their effectiveness, well-being and capacity to pursue leadership roles.

Drawing on feminist theory, these findings illustrate how patriarchal norms continue to dictate women's lived realities even in professional environments that claim gender neutrality. The tension between personal identity as a mother or wife and professional identity as an instructor is deeply intertwined with cultural expectations of obedience, sacrifice and modesty from women. This intersectional tension reflects the broader struggle for gender equality in Nepal.

Structural Barriers and Institutional Power Dynamics

The underrepresentation of women in leadership roles within TVET institutions emerged as a structural issue rather than an individual limitation. Despite being qualified and experienced, the instructors faced institutional barriers that restricted their access to decision-making spaces. This aligns with cultural capital theory, which suggests that individuals' cultural backgrounds, gendered experiences and social networks influence their access to institutional power.

The male-dominated leadership structures described by the participants reinforce the idea that technical education is a masculine domain. These structural patterns not only hinder women's professional growth but also sustain a cycle where women instructors remain confined to classrooms, with minimal

influence over curriculum, policies or institutional strategies. This has implications for the overall effectiveness and inclusiveness of the TVET system, especially for female students who lack visible role models in leadership positions.

Women as Agents of Change in TVET

One of the most significant insights emerging from the narratives is that women instructors are already playing active roles as agents of change even within restrictive environments. Their commitment to students, innovative pedagogical practices and dedication to professional growth demonstrate leadership qualities that are often overlooked due to gender bias entrenched in society and workplace.

This finding challenges deficit-based narratives that portray women as passive victims of systemic oppression. Instead, their stories illustrate a vision for a more inclusive TVET system, one built on collaboration, empathy, equitable leadership and continuous learning. Their agency suggests that empowering women within TVET institutions could have transformative effects on teaching quality, institutional culture and gender equity outcomes.

Key Insights, Conclusions and Implications

This study explored the experiences of women instructors from Nepal's TVET institutions, revealing that they face challenges, such as biasedness, inequality and a lack of resources. It emphasizes that

power in education is not only about money but also about sharing knowledge, where power-sharing is essential for societal transformation. Despite these challenges, women instructors are hardworking, talented and capable, often overcoming stereotypes and proving their worth. Their success in teaching is influenced by factors like time management, leadership and an understanding of cultural issues. Women instructors contribute to creating a better learning environment, and their ability to build strong relationships with students and colleagues enhances the overall atmosphere in the classroom. They are disciplined, ethical and focused on achieving results, creating a supportive and positive environment that helps in improving student performance. Their flexibility and caring attitude are strengths, which enable them to handle various challenges while connecting diverse cultural backgrounds.

The study concludes that women instructors are enriching and transparent in their academic roles, possessing strong skills in classroom management and ensuring quality education. They believe in their ability to lead and guide students, and they maintain a harmonious relationship with both students and staff. The research also highlights that women instructors create a positive, non-competitive learning environment, where students perform better. Despite challenges, they are able to connect different cultural practices and improve educational outcomes.

The findings highlight the urgent need for gender-responsive institutional reforms within TVET. Policies must go beyond

promoting women's participation and instead aim to dismantle the structural and cultural barriers that inhibit their advancement. Some key implications include:

- Establishing women-friendly institutional cultures through gender sensitivity training, supportive leadership and inclusive decision-making structures.
- Providing targeted professional development opportunities for women instructors, especially in leadership, pedagogy and technology integration.
- Strengthening gender-responsive policies within TVET, ensuring that women are adequately represented in curriculum development, management committees and policy formulation.
- Supporting work-life balance initiatives, such as flexible schedules, childcare support and counseling services to reduce the dual burden carried by women educators.

Such interventions would not only enhance the professional growth of women instructors but also contribute to broader goals of equity, inclusion and quality in Nepal's TVET sector.

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