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# **EVOLVING FEMINIST DISCOURSES IN NEPAL: PURSUING RIGHTS, RECOGNITION, AND GENDER LIBERATION**

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## **Abstract**

Anchored in Nepal's intricate socio-legal context, where entrenched patriarchal values have historically informed institutional structures and social relations; the development of feminist discourse has evolved as both a critical reaction to systemic marginalization and a driving force for progressive transformation. Situated within periods of democratic transition and constitutional reform, this study aims to explore the extent to which feminist endeavors and organized advocacy have contributed to reshaping legal frameworks, governance dynamics, and gender justice paradigms. The primary objective is to critically assess the extent to which these engagements have translated into substantive equality, particularly for women situated at the intersections of caste, class, ethnicity, and sexuality. Methodologically, the research adopts a qualitative and doctrinal approach, drawing upon constitutional texts, legislative instruments, policy developments, and scholarly interpretations, complemented by an intersectional analytical framework to capture layered experiences of marginalization and resistance. The findings reveal that while Nepal has witnessed notable progress in formal recognition, representation, and rights-based constitutionalism, these gains often remain constrained by enduring structural inequalities and symbolic inclusion. Sustained feminist engagement, particularly from marginalized voices, remains indispensable in bridging the gap between normative commitments and lived realities, thereby advancing a more equitable and emancipatory vision of justice in Nepal. The analysis argues that achieving substantive gender

liberation in Nepal necessitates a transition beyond formal equality towards transformative justice grounded in equitable recognition, participatory inclusion, structural reconfiguration, and resilient feminist praxis.

**Keywords:** Feminism in Nepal, Gender Liberation, Women Rights, Intersectionality, Recognition, Constitution, Justice.

## **1. Introduction and Theoretical Framework: Feminism, Gender Justice, and Liberation**

**Feminism**, in its conceptual and practical dimensions, represents both an ideological framework and a transformative social movement directed at confronting and deconstructing the entrenched hierarchies based on gender asymmetry. At its core, feminism interrogates the historical and systemic subordination of women across all domains of human life - social, economic, political, legal, and cultural and articulates a vision for an egalitarian society premised on dignity, autonomy, and justice (Beasley, 1999). Rather than embodying a uniform doctrine, feminism encompasses a multiplicity of schools of thought ranging from liberal and radical to Marxist, poststructural, ecofeminist, and intersectional perspectives. Each of these paradigms offers distinct critiques of patriarchy and delineates varied strategies for attaining gender justice (Tong, 2009). Bell hooks (2000) articulates feminism as “a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression,” explicitly clarifying that it is not anti-male but anti-sexism as a systemic problem embedded within social institutions. The pervasiveness of patriarchy, as critically defined by Sylvia Walby (1990), constitutes “a system of interrelated social structures through which men dominate, exploit, and oppress women.” Feminism, therefore, becomes a counter-hegemonic force that not only resists these structures but reimagines the foundations of power and identity. Within this framework, **Gender justice** emerges as a normative goal rooted in the equitable treatment of all individuals, irrespective of their gender identities. As stated by UN Women (2019), gender justice entails the dismantling of structural barriers, legal inequities, and discriminatory practices while ensuring equal rights, access, responsibilities, and opportunities in both public policy and societal engagement. It is predicated on acknowledging the intersection of gender with other markers of identity such as class, caste, ethnicity, ability, and sexual orientation. Beyond the discourse of equality, the notion of **Gender liberation** demands a more transformative restructuring of power relations and institutional norms. Nancy Fraser (1997) introduces the concept of *participatory parity*,

which she defines as the condition in which all individuals can interact as equals in social life without institutionalized subordination. The true gender emancipation necessitates more than formal equality under the law that requires a fundamental reconfiguration of existing power structures to achieve participatory parity wherein all individuals are positioned to engage as equals in both social and political arenas (Fraser, 1997). Gender liberation, therefore, transcends symbolic inclusion or tokenism and instead advocates for systemic transformation that repositions women and other marginalized genders as active agents of transformation.

In the post-colonial and global South context particularly within Nepal, feminist struggles must be understood in relation to localized histories, cultural intricacies, and enduring forms of structural violence. Feminism in Nepal extends beyond the advocacy for legal reforms; it encompasses a broader emancipatory endeavor to claim political voice, social recognition, economic justice, and bodily autonomy. Feminist philosopher Uma Narayan (1997) cautions against universalizing Western feminist paradigms and underscores the need to situate feminist objectives within indigenous realities and culturally specific narratives of oppression and resistance. Feminism functions not merely as an ideological lens for understanding emancipation but as a transformative practice rooted in lived experiences and collective resistance, aimed at deconstructing patriarchal systems and advancing inclusive and democratic societal structures (Mohanty, 2003; Narayan, 1997).

## **2. Methodology**

The study employs a qualitative framework rooted in critical interpretative analysis, drawing extensively on existing scholarly literature, legal frameworks, and evolving feminist discourses. Utilizing a doctrinal research design, the study engages in critical discourse analysis to explore theoretical narratives and feminist critiques that inform gender dynamics within the Nepali socio-legal landscape. By analyzing normative texts alongside factual findings from secondary sources, the research aims to provide an objective yet critical account of the conditions of Nepali women and the broader trajectory of gender justice in Nepal.

## **3. Results and Discussion**

### **3.1 Feminist Engagements in Nepal: A Socio-Historical and Political Perspective**

Feminist activism and theory in Nepal have evolved through complex intersections of historical shifts, cultural specificities, and socio-political transformations. Rather than existing as a singular, uniform phenomenon, feminism in Nepal has emerged as a diverse, pluralistic, and

context-specific set of practices and discourses shaped by the country's colonial legacy, internal socio-political dynamics, and transnational influences (Bhattachan, 2001). The movement has grown organically out of women's resistance to systemic discrimination, patriarchy, and socio-economic marginalization, influenced equally by local struggles and global feminist ideologies. Nepali feminist movements are deeply embedded in the experiences of women from multiple and intersecting identities across caste, ethnicity, region, religion, language, and class who have collectively contested their subordination in both private and public domains. These movements cannot be understood through a homogenized lens, as they reflect the lived realities of diverse groups including Janajati, Dalit, Madhesi, Muslim, and rural women, each navigating distinct forms of oppression and exclusion (Tamang, 2009; Sharma & Pradhan, 2004). The feminist response in Nepal has thus taken the form of a multifaceted struggle against gender-based violence, social stigma, systemic silence, and institutionalized inequality, reclaiming voice, space, recognition and power across generations.

Women in Nepal have not merely supported broader democratization or nation-building agendas but have proactively shaped them. Their activism has contributed to the reshaping of public discourse, demanded policy reforms, and initiated shifts in cultural perceptions. This is evident in their critical roles in transitional political processes, including constitution-making, peacebuilding, and grassroots mobilization (Manchanda, 2001). Feminist engagement in Nepal has often moved beyond symbolic or superficial inclusion, instead advancing demands for deep-rooted structural change within societal, political, and institutional frameworks. Accordingly, feminism in Nepal must be understood not as a static concept but as a dynamic and evolving praxis rooted in continuous resistance, critical dialogue, and restructuring of gendered power dynamics. It challenges conventional legalistic approaches and rights-based discourses by expanding its focus toward the realization of substantive gender justice, equitable economic distribution, meaningful recognition, and individual as well as collective autonomy. In this regard, **gender liberation in the Nepali context** reflects a holistic vision. It integrates the demand for equal representation with the decolonization of gendered social structures, the dismantling of patriarchal norms, and the pursuit of inclusive development rooted in feminist ethics. This broad-based feminist framework continues to inspire both policy-level engagement and grassroots resistance, challenging not only state and institutional structures but also cultural practices that perpetuate gender-based subordination (Mohanty, 2003; Narayan, 1997).

### **3.1.1 The Evolution of Women's Liberation and Feminist Struggles in Nepal: An Overview**

Nepali women have long demonstrated resilience, resolve, and relentless courage in confronting socio-political oppression and systemic gender injustices. The struggle for women's emancipation in Nepal is not a recent phenomenon but is rooted in history, where women courageously resisted imperialism and inequality. During the Anglo-Nepal War of 1814, also referred to as the *Nalapani resistance*, women stood shoulder to shoulder with soldiers to defend their sovereignty against British colonial intrusion (Kunwar, 2013). Figures like Yogmaya Neupane, an early 20th-century spiritual reformer and social revolutionary, spearheaded a movement against patriarchal and caste-based violence, advocating for social justice and gender equity. Similarly, women like Rewanta Kumari, Dibya Koirala, Snehalata, Ganga Maya, and Chandra Maya contributed significantly to Nepal's feminist awakening, raising voices against embedded discriminatory practices (Kunwar, 2013). The celebration of International Women's Day in Nepal began in 2034 B.S. (1977 A.D.) under the leadership of Parijat (a prominent poet and activist), symbolizing the assertion of women's collective identity and political agency. By 2038 B.S., it was nationally observed with demands centered on equal pay for equal work, maternity protections, and the broader recognition of women's socio-political concerns (Thapa, 2020). Women's active involvement in grassroots movements such as student uprisings, peasant revolts, and politically sensitive incidents like Chhintang and Piskar, demonstrated their commitment to systemic change, although decision-making authority remained largely elusive to them (Shrestha, 2017).

The landmark reform in 2054 B.S. mandating one female representative in every ward during local elections was a pivotal moment in enhancing women's political representation. The 11th Amendment to the *Muluki Ain* in 2058 B.S. (2001 A.D.) marked a turning point, enshrining critical rights for women such as the right to ancestral property for unmarried daughters, inheritance rights for widows, rights to divorce and abortion, and provisions penalizing gender-based violence (Manandhar, 2002). This amendment is widely regarded as one of the most significant legal achievements following the restoration of democracy in 1990. In the same year, the National Women Commission (NWC) was established on Falgun 24, 2058 B.S., with a mandate to formulate legislative drafts and monitor the enforcement of women's rights. However, the call for its elevation to a constitutional body was only realized under the 2015 Constitution. The historic declaration by the reinstated Parliament on Jestha 4, 2063 B.S. (June 19, 2006), led to the formal abolition of the monarchy and the establishment of a federal democratic republic- a monumental shift in Nepal's governance. Notably, the four-point

motion of public concern tabled on Jestha 6, 2063 B.S., addressed critical gender justice demands: citizenship rights through maternal lineage, equal property rights, one-third political representation, and the elimination of discriminatory legislation. The motion was passed unanimously on Jestha 16, symbolizing a watershed moment in the feminist history of Nepal (Tamang, 2009). After decades of persistent advocacy, mobilization, and negotiation, Nepal's Constitution of 2072 B.S. (2015 A.D.) acknowledged the majority of women's rights that had long been demanded, including equal lineage, reproductive rights, and inclusive political representation. However, contentious issues such as citizenship through mothers and full recognition of independent identity remain unresolved (Poudel & Tamang, 2015). Nonetheless, Nepal's women's movement has laid the foundational bedrock for gender equity and continues to evolve as a formidable force challenging structural inequalities and safeguarding democratic values.

### **3.2 Tracing the Historical and Contemporary Trajectory of Feminist Discourses in Nepal**

#### *3.2.1. Proto-Feminist Resistance and Women's Political Awakening (Pre-1951)*

The roots of feminist consciousness in Nepal can be located within the anti-Rana political uprisings, where women, despite operating under severe socio-political constraints, began to assert their agency in nationalist movements. These early contributions, though often obscured within patriarchal historiography, represented a foundational rupture in traditional gender norms and laid the groundwork for political engagement. Women's participation during this era signified more than auxiliary support and challenged entrenched socio-cultural boundaries, even as male-dominated narratives continued to marginalize their roles (Acharya, 2010). This period, though devoid of organized feminist assertion, carried latent feminist assertions grounded in resistance to exclusion.

#### *3.2.2. Democratic Opening and the Birth of Women's Organizations (1951–1990)*

With the collapse of the Rana autocracy and the formal establishment of multiparty democracy in 1951, Nepal witnessed the proliferation of state-aligned women's organizations, including the Nepal Women's Association (NWA). These entities offered initial platforms for women's civic participation, yet remained largely co-opted by patriarchal political parties. Feminist scholar critiques this period for its limited emancipatory impact, as the prevailing focus remained on maternalist welfare approaches rather than structural gender transformation (Karki & Seddon, 2003). The absence of an autonomous feminist consciousness meant that women's

advocacy during this period seldom interrogated deeper inequalities rooted in caste, class, and gender.

### *3.2.3. Constitutional Reforms, Grassroots Mobilization, and Identity-Based Feminism (1990–2006)*

The promulgation of the 1990 Constitution introduced legal commitments to gender equality, yet failed to ensure substantive enforcement or institutional reform. In response, grassroots feminist activism surged, particularly from historically marginalized groups- Dalit, Janajati, and Madhesi women who critiqued the dominant, Kathmandu-centric and upper-caste female leadership for its exclusivity (Tamang, 2009). These years marked a critical shift from elite-dominated women's advocacy to intersectional feminist mobilization. Civil society actors not only confronted the state's patriarchal apparatus but also fostered inclusive frameworks that integrated issues of ethnicity, regional inequality, and class-based exploitation (Sharma & Pradhan, 2004).

### *3.2.4. Post-Conflict Feminist Constitutionalism and Political Engagement (2006–2015)*

The signing of the Comprehensive Peace Accord in 2006 and subsequent drafting of the Constitution of Nepal (2015) marked a watershed in feminist legal advocacy. The constitution institutionalized progressive gender provisions, such as the right to safe motherhood, reproductive autonomy, equal inheritance, and mandatory political representation (Article 38, Constitution of Nepal, 2015). Nevertheless, these gains were tempered by structural and procedural limitations, including discriminatory citizenship laws that privilege paternal lineage and inadequate access to justice in rural areas (Adhikari, 2021; Lawoti & Hangen, 2013). This period also underscored the tension between formal legal recognition and the lived realities of women navigating bureaucratic and cultural obstacles.

### *3.2.5. Contemporary Feminist Resistance, Digital Activism, and Intersectionality (Post-2015)*

Feminist engagement in the current era reflects a dynamic shift toward digital activism, intersectional advocacy, and radical challenges to systemic power. Movements like **#RageAgainstRape**, sparked by the 2020 Baitadi rape-murder case, signify how online platforms and street protests converge to demand survivor-centric justice, legal accountability, and cultural reckoning. Simultaneously, Dalit feminist organizations, such as the Feminist Dalit Organization (FEDO), have consistently challenged upper-caste hegemony within mainstream feminism, emphasizing that caste and patriarchy are co-constitutive (Sunar, 2021). Queer and

trans feminist movements, particularly led by Blue Diamond Society, have expanded feminist premises by advocating for recognition of gender and sexual minorities in law and policy. Contemporary feminist discourse in Nepal now engages deeply with **intersectionality**, a concept introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), to analyze how overlapping identities such as caste, class, gender, sexuality, and disability generate compounded forms of marginalization. This has allowed for a more nuanced critique of both state violence and intra-movement hierarchies. Additionally, the role of media especially social media, podcasts, and women-led journalism (e.g., *Sajha Sawal*) has been critical in reshaping public consciousness and amplifying feminist narratives, particularly among younger demographics. Landmark judicial decisions have reinforced these shifts. For instance, in *Meera Dhungana v. HMG Nepal* (2004), the Supreme Court declared that discriminatory citizenship provisions violated constitutional guarantees. Similarly, *Sunil Babu Pant v. Nepal Government* (2007) marked a historic recognition of LGBTQ+ rights, aligning Nepali jurisprudence with international human rights norms.

### 3.2.6. International Commitments and Feminist Accountability Mechanisms

Nepal's ratification of international frameworks such as the **Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW, 1979)**, the **Beijing Platform for Action (1995)**, and **Sustainable Development Goal 5 (Gender Equality)** has contributed to normative progress and legal harmonization. Yet, implementation remains inconsistent. Periodic CEDAW shadow reports from Nepali civil society reflect persistent gender gaps, inadequate enforcement, and the need for feminist accountability mechanisms within state institutions (UN Women, 2020; OHCHR Nepal, 2021).

**Table 1: Phased Movement for the Establishment of Women's Rights in Nepal**

Historical Phase	Time Period (B.S.)	Thematic Focus	Key Characteristics	Movement Scope	Activism Intensity
Early Reformatory Phase	Until 2008	Anti-Rana tyranny; reformist and idealistic agenda	Focused on ending Rana regime; advocated for equal education, rights, and voiced against patriarchy. Women's consciousness began to	Low	Emerging

			emerge despite marginalization.		
<b>Political Domination Phase</b>	2008–2017	Political direction; limited gender focus	Dominated by national political agendas. Gender-specific issues like discrimination and inequality were side-lined. Women’s voices not adequately recognized in leadership.	Limited	Politically reactive
<b>State vs. Movement Clash Phase</b>	2017–2036	Political alignment with suppression	Government-led women’s organizations challenged grassroots efforts. Women’s movement became politically inclined, overshadowing core women-centric issues.	Narrow	Suppressed but active
<b>Rise of Democratic Participation</b>	2036–2046	Support for People’s Movement 2046	Women significantly participated in mass protests. Although not centralized, their role in political agitation grew, signaling a more inclusive momentum.	Growing	Mobilized
<b>NGO-led Reformist Phase</b>	2046–2062/63	Advocacy through NGOs for legal and social reforms	Civil society actors, especially NGOs, spearheaded programs on gender justice and legal reform. Awareness campaigns gained traction nationwide.	Widened	Structured & organized
<b>Post-Conflict Equity Phase</b>	2063–2072	Justice, equality, socialism-oriented	Emphasized economic independence, public participation, and dismantling of structural discrimination. End of monarchy marked a	Expanding	Intensified

			new democratic space.		
<b>Constitutional Consolidation Phase</b>	2072– Now	Legal empowerment, substantive equality	Promulgation of the 2072 Constitution, Civil and Criminal Codes ensuring women’s rights. Legal frameworks improved; focus shifted to ensuring substantive equality.	Broad	Institutionalized

### 3.2.1 Foundational Struggles and Historical Continuities in the Nepali Women’s Movement: Determinants, Learnings, and Transformative Pathways

Nepal’s women’s movement has evolved as an integral thread of the nation’s socio-political fabric, reflecting an enduring struggle against embedded inequalities, patriarchal dominance, and systemic injustice. Its development is not only a narrative of resistance but also of conscious engagement in state-building, civic empowerment, and normative transformation. The trajectory of this movement is shaped by four pivotal dimensions that have underpinned its historical continuity and contemporary relevance.

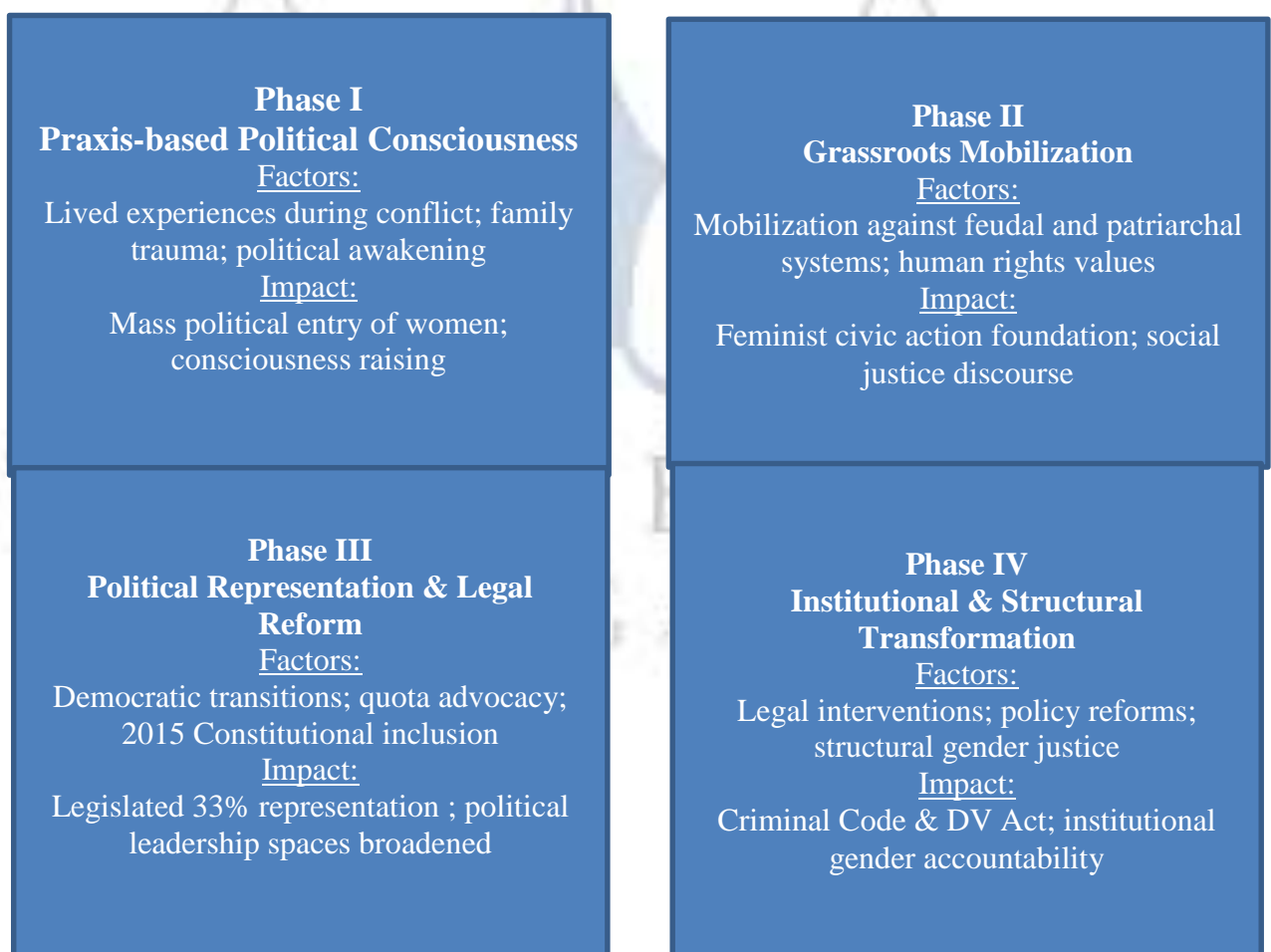
**First**, the politicization of Nepali women arose largely from their embodied experiences and engagement during periods of national unrest. Many entered public activism through what feminist theorists refer to as “praxis-based consciousness”- the awakening that emerges through lived participation in resistance and care work during times of political repression (Clarke, 1995; Wangler, 1990). Women who faced the disappearance, incarceration, or torture of family members by authoritarian regimes developed political awareness and solidarity, transforming personal suffering into collective feminist agency (Tamang, 2009).

**Second**, local-level mobilizations emerged as direct responses to systemic social marginalization, caste and gender discrimination, and the intersectional weight of feudal hierarchies. These movements catalyzed broader discourses on justice and equality. From the 1990 People’s Movement to the Maoist insurgency (1996–2006), women were not peripheral actors but central figures in shaping civic consciousness. These events sowed the seeds of feminist collectivity, pushing forward narratives that expanded women’s legal and social subjectivity (Shrestha & Tamang, 2015; Manchanda, 2001).

**Third**, there was a critical realization that without participation in formal politics and governance, transformation would remain limited. This strategic orientation led to the demand

for institutional representation. The democratic waves of 1990 and 2006 acted as accelerants for women's rights discourse. The promulgation of the 2015 Constitution marked a watershed moment as it codified gender parity in political participation by mandating a minimum one-third representation of women at all levels of government (Constitution of Nepal, 2015, Article 84). This was a direct product of sustained advocacy and political activism led by women's coalitions (Bhadra, 2021).

**Fourth**, the movement matured into a structural reform endeavor, intervening within the state's legal and institutional framework. Feminist activism began addressing deeply embedded patriarchal norms in law and governance, pushing for systemic change. Landmark legislation like the Domestic Violence (Offense and Punishment) Act, 2009 and the Criminal Code, 2017 represent institutional acknowledgment of women's demands. Yet, laws alone are insufficient. For these reforms to be transformative, they must be accompanied by initiatives to address discriminatory practices, violence, and socio-cultural stereotypes (UN Women Nepal, 2023).



**Figure 1: Phased Struggles and Historical Continuities in the Nepali Women's Movement**

### **3.3 Persistent Barriers to Gender Liberation in Nepal: A Critical Analysis**

Despite considerable advancements in legal frameworks and constitutional guarantees promoting gender equality, Nepal continues to face entrenched structural, cultural, and institutional challenges that hinder the realization of genuine gender liberation. The gap between legal provisions and lived realities remains wide, reflecting deeply embedded patriarchal systems, socio-economic disparities, and cultural resistance to transformative change.

#### *3.3.1 Legal and Institutional Inconsistencies*

While Nepal's 2015 Constitution includes progressive clauses such as Articles 18 and 38 guaranteeing equality and specific rights to women; enforcement remains erratic and often symbolic. For example, the constitutional provision allowing children to acquire citizenship through their mothers continues to face procedural restrictions, often dependent on the father's identity, thereby reinforcing patriarchal lineage systems (Adhikari, 2021). The judiciary, despite some landmark rulings, continues to reflect gender bias in interpretation and implementation of laws, echoing a broader trend of weak institutional accountability and androcentric legal culture (Shrestha, 2019).

#### *3.3.2 Cultural Essentialism and Symbolic Representation*

Cultural essentialism as the portrayal of women primarily as caregivers and moral guardians, undermines efforts toward substantive empowerment. Women are frequently included in political and social spaces for symbolic purposes, often without decision-making authority or transformative agency. Political tokenism persists, as evidenced by women occupying mandated quotas in parliament without actual legislative influence (Tamang, 2009). This reflects what Fraser (1997) calls "misrecognition," where inclusion without power reproduces inequality under the guise of representation.

#### *3.3.3 Economic Disparities and Labor Market Exclusion*

Nepal's labor market continues to reflect stark gender inequities. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2023), women's labor force participation stands at approximately 26.3%, significantly lower than men's. Women remain concentrated in informal, low-paid, and insecure jobs, often lacking social protections or upward mobility. Wage disparities are persistent, with women earning on average 30% less than men for similar work (World Bank, 2022). Structural barriers including discriminatory recruitment practices, gendered division of

labor, and lack of access to financial resources further deepen economic dependence and marginalization.

### *3.3.4 Educational Inequities and Gender Gaps in STEM*

Although Nepal has made progress in reducing female illiteracy from 42% in 2011 to 25% in 2021 (CBS, 2021), gender disparities remain pronounced in higher education, particularly in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). Women's enrolment in technical education and leadership in academia remains disproportionately low (Acharya & Luitel, 2020). Educational exclusion is even more severe for Dalit, Muslim, and rural girls, whose intersectional identities amplify the barriers to opportunity and empowerment (Crenshaw, 1989; FEDO, 2022).

### *3.3.5 Gender-Based Violence and Violation of Bodily Autonomy*

Gender-based violence (GBV) continues to pose a major challenge to women's safety, autonomy, and dignity. According to UN Women (2023), over one-third of Nepali women have experienced physical or sexual violence in their lifetime. Cases of domestic abuse, rape, and workplace harassment remain high, with many incidents underreported due to stigma, fear, or lack of institutional support. Survivors often face re-victimization in legal procedures, with insufficient shelter homes, trained police personnel, or psychosocial counseling. The *#RageAgainstRape* movement, ignited by the Baitadi rape-murder case in 2020, reflects growing public outrage but also reveals systemic failures in the justice delivery system.

### *3.3.6 Health Disparities and Reproductive Injustice*

Health and reproductive rights are among the most neglected aspects of gender justice in Nepal. While Article 38 ensures reproductive health as a fundamental right, but realization remains uneven especially in rural and marginalized regions. Women in far-flung districts face poor access to prenatal care, skilled birth attendants, and emergency obstetric services (MoHP & UNFPA, 2022). Unsafe abortions, menstrual stigma, and lack of access to contraceptives further restrict bodily autonomy. Adolescent girls, in particular, suffer from poor menstrual hygiene, school dropouts due to lack of sanitation, vulnerability to early marriage and social expectations.

### *3.3.7 Political Underrepresentation and Power Imbalances*

Despite constitutional mandates ensuring 33% women's representation in federal and provincial parliaments, substantive political empowerment remains elusive. Most women in political positions are appointed through quotas rather than grassroots electoral processes, limiting their influence and reinforcing the perception of tokenism (Sharma, 2021). Moreover, patriarchal party structures and male-dominated political culture inhibit women's leadership, participation in high-level decision-making, and policy formulation.

### *3.3.8 Digital Misogyny and Backlash Against Feminist Voices*

The digital public sphere, while offering new platforms for feminist expression, has also become a site of backlash and cyber harassment. Feminist activists, journalists, and scholars often face trolling, threats, and character assassination online, reflecting a broader resistance to gender justice narratives (Thapa, 2022). This "tech-enabled misogyny" mirrors offline patriarchal practices and contributes to the silencing of critical feminist voices in Nepal's media and academic spaces.

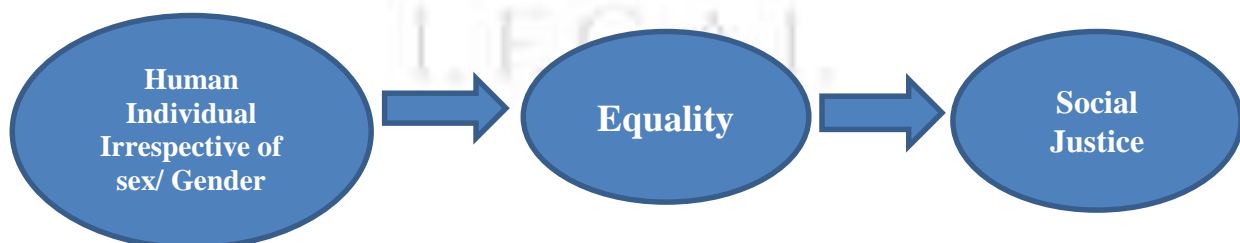
### *3.3.9 International Obligations and Local Inertia*

While Nepal is a signatory to several international gender equality frameworks including **CEDAW (ratified in 1991)**, the **Beijing Platform for Action (1995)**, and the **Sustainable Development Goals (particularly SDG 5 on Gender Equality)**, however, domestic translation of these commitments remains inconsistent. Periodic reviews by civil society organizations continue to reflect Nepal's failure to implement many CEDAW recommendations, particularly those related to intersectionality, access to justice, and women with disabilities (OHCHR, 2021).

Hence, the multifaceted barriers to gender liberation in Nepal as legal, economic, cultural, political, and technological, demonstrate that symbolic inclusion or isolated legal reforms are insufficient. Achieving gender justice requires systemic reimagining and structural transformation through inclusive policymaking, feminist legal frameworks, intersectional education, and sustained social activism. It also demands constitutional accountability, gender-sensitive governance, and dismantling of patriarchal power relations entrenched in Nepali institutions and society. It is only through profound and transformative reforms that gender equality in Nepal can transcend symbolic commitments and evolve into a tangible, lived experience for all women and gender-diverse individuals.

#### 4. Feminism and the Pursuit of Equality: A Catalyst for Social Transformation

Feminism, at its core, is a transformative ideology and movement that strives for the establishment of equality across all genders, particularly focusing on dismantling patriarchal structures that have historically marginalized women. The essence of feminist advocacy is to ensure that gender equality is not merely a legal ideal or rhetorical promise but a lived reality in every sphere of individual and collective life (Connell, 2009). In this context, gender equality signifies not only the formal equal treatment of individuals regardless of their sex or gender identity, but also the equitable restructuring of societal systems that perpetuate inequality. Achieving genuine gender parity is intrinsically linked to broader social and economic development. Equal participation of women, men, and gender-diverse individuals across political, economic, educational, and cultural domains enhances a nation's capacity for innovation, inclusive governance, and sustainable progress (Sen, 2001; UN Women, 2023). Feminism challenges deeply entrenched gender hierarchies and underscores that development efforts are ineffective unless they reflect the diverse needs and lived realities of all societal groups, particularly the historically disadvantaged. Social justice becomes achievable only when discrimination, explicit or systemic is eliminated from every institutional and interpersonal space. Feminist legal theory emphasizes that effective legal frameworks are indispensable for protecting those who are subjected to gender-based injustices (MacKinnon, 1989). This includes not only enacting anti-discrimination laws but also ensuring their just enforcement and accessibility. Moreover, feminist praxis reflects that promoting women's rights and empowerment is not about privileging one group over another, but about correcting historically rooted imbalances that hinder collective human flourishing (Hooks, 2000).



**Figure 2: The Pursuit of Equality**

In societies marked by rigid status-based stratifications often intersecting with caste, class, ethnicity, or religion, the principle of equality often faces structural and ideological resistance.

Feminism, by calling for equity-based social relations, questions the legitimacy of such hierarchies and seeks to reconfigure them in favor of human dignity and justice. It posits that equality must not be confined to superficial sameness but must accommodate differences through equitable access to opportunities, resources, and recognition (Fraser, 2009). Therefore, the feminist movement for equality is inherently a movement for systemic change. This change entails dismantling institutions and mindsets that sustain privilege for some and oppression for others. In this process, the goal is not only to equalize opportunities but also to transform the conditions under which inequalities are legitimized and perpetuated (Nussbaum, 2011). Equality, thus, becomes both a principle of justice and a mechanism for societal progress. It must hinge on eradicating the socio-political conditions that justify and reproduce exclusion and subjugation. True liberation involves the creation of a society where gender does not determine one's access to rights, resources, dignity, or power. It is a liberation that transcends legal equality and envisions a restructured social order that is inclusive, equitable, and just. Such a transformation is not a passive evolution but a deliberate and continuous struggle driven by collective action, critical consciousness, and a shared vision for justice.

## **5. Conclusion: Advancing Feminist Engagements, Women's Rights, and Gender Equality in Nepal**

Despite legislative achievements, decades of activism, and widespread social awareness campaigns, the everyday realities of countless Nepali women remain deeply shaped by patriarchal hierarchies, cultural orthodoxy, and systemic exclusion. Patriarchal structures continue to confine women predominantly to the private sphere, rendering them largely absent in public leadership and reducing their contributions to undervalued, unpaid reproductive and domestic labor, devoid of recognition or autonomy.

The pursuit of gender equality and the realization of women's rights in Nepal must be conceptualized as a dynamic, multilayered process that transcends legal provisions. It necessitates profound structural changes across economic systems, political institutions, cultural norms, and social values. Legislative safeguards must be meaningfully operationalized through gender-inclusive governance that embeds gender equity into national planning, public budgeting, and institutional practices. Economic empowerment is equally vital requiring equitable access to land, inheritance rights, finance, dignified employment, and decision-making positions. A critical and transformative education system that deconstructs rigid gender norms and fosters empowerment from an early age is essential for generational transformation.

Additionally, localized feminist resistance particularly led by Dalit, Janajati, Madhesi, and queer communities must be supported and amplified as indispensable to building participatory democracy and true justice. Contemporary challenges such as online misogyny, political tokenism, gender-based violence, and inequitable access to healthcare further call for an intersectional, inclusive, and contextually rooted feminist strategy. Intersectionality reveals that compounded identities based on caste, class, ethnicity, geography, ability, and sexuality shape different forms of marginalization, making fragmented or symbolic approaches insufficient. Achieving transformative gender justice in Nepal demands coordinated efforts across all sectors including governmental, civil society, educational, media, and legal, guided by accountability, inclusion, and equity. This involves not just dismantling oppressive structures, but also reconstructing a society rooted in mutual dignity, equal opportunity, and human rights for all genders. National progress cannot be achieved in isolation from women's empowerment; rather, the status of women is the cornerstone of any just and sustainable development.

Nepali feminism has traversed a courageous path of resistance, critique, and resilience. Yet, it must continue to evolve and grounded in solidarity, intersectionality, and critical reflexivity to achieve its transformative vision. The ongoing struggle for gender equality in Nepal is not an unfinished failure but a powerful narrative of hope, resistance, and the restructuring of a just, inclusive, and liberated society.

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