

WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE AND PERCEPTION OF THEIR PARTICIPATION IN  
THE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS: AN INTERPRETIVE INQUIRY

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A Dissertation

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## AN ABSTRACT

of the dissertation of *Ramjee Prasad Chaulagain* for the degree of *Master of Philosophy in Development Studies* entitled *Women's Experience and Perception of Their Participation in the Development Process: An Interpretive Inquiry* was presented on *12 January 2026*.

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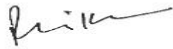
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Following the promulgation of the Constitution of Nepal 2015 and the federal restructuring of the state, local-level governments have emerged as fundamental bodies for comprehensive development. While legal backgrounds such as the Local Government Operation Act 2017 authorize women's proportionate participation, a substantial inequality remains between policy commitment and practical realism. This study explores women's perceptions and lived experiences of participation in the local development process within a Rural Municipality in the Lalitpur district. Stranded in an interpretive paradigm, the research employs an Interpretive Inquiry methodology to uncover the subjective meanings twelve purposively designated women, including elected representatives and community members associated with the local development activities, allocate to their participation. The data produced through in-depth interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis.

This study inserts two theoretical lenses: Participatory Development Theory to examine the quality and process of engagement, and Gender and Development theory to examine structural power exercise. The findings of the study uncover that while women's numerical attendance has been increased to meet the current legal requirements, their participation remains symbolic and tokenistic. Women contend with a continuum of disempowerment determined by interlocking barriers, encompassing deeply rooted patriarchal norms, attitudes and practices of the burden

of household work, social responsibilities, and institutional negligence that arranges physical structure over human capital. Regardless of these limitations, the study identifies an optimistic unfolding of women's inherent agencies, where members are increasingly transitioning from submissive presence to deliberate expression of their justices. The study concludes that succeeding in meaningful participation requires transferring further than organizational fulfillment to fundamental transformation. It indicates that local governments must institutionalize gender-accessible budgeting, market-linked economic empowerment, and behavioral transformations to demolish the informal masculine gatekeeping that presently controls women's independent power, which can hinder women's access to resources and decision-making processes in their communities.



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## शोध सार

विकास अध्ययन दर्शनशास्त्रको स्नातकोत्तर डिग्रीका लागि रामजी प्रसाद चौलागाईंको शोध प्रबन्धको शीर्षक “विकास प्रक्रियामा महिलाहरूको सहभागिता सम्बन्धी उनीहरूको धारणा र अनुभव: एक व्याख्यात्मक खोज” २८ पुस २०८२ मा प्रस्तुत गरिएको छ ।

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उप. प्रा. लीना गुरुङ, पिएचडी

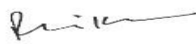
शोध निर्देशक

नेपालको संविधान, २०७२ जारी भएपछि राज्यको संघीय संरचनासँगै स्थानीय तहका सरकार विकासका लागि आधारभूत निकायका रूपमा स्थापित भएका छन् । वर्तमान संवैधानिक तथा कानूनहरूले राज्यका हरेक तह र विकास प्रक्रियामा महिला सहभागिताको सुनिश्चित व्यवस्था गरेका छन् । यसो भएता पनि कानूनी प्रावधान र व्यावहारिक यथार्थताबीच असमानता कायमै रहेको देखिन्छ ।

ललितपुर जिल्लाको एक गाउँपालिकामा गरिएको यो अध्ययनले स्थानीय विकास प्रक्रियामा महिलाहरूको सहभागिता र यस सम्बन्धमा उनीहरूको धारणा र अनुभवहरूको अन्वेषण गरेको छ । व्याख्यात्मक ढाँचामा आधारित यस अनुसन्धानले स्थानीय विकास प्रक्रियामा सहभागी महिला जनप्रतिनिधिहरू, शिक्षक, कर्मचारी, सहजकर्ता, र उपभोक्ता समितिका पदाधिकारीहरू मध्ये उद्देश्यमूलक रूपमा छनोट गरिएका १२ जना महिलाहरूबाट आ-आफ्नो अनुभव र बुझाईका अर्थ निर्माण गर्ने व्याख्यात्मक खोज विधि अपनाइएको छ । यसमा गहन अन्तर्वाताबाट प्राप्त तथ्याङ्कलाई विषयगत विश्लेषण विधि प्रयोग गरि अध्ययन गरिएको छ ।

यस अनुसन्धानमा सहभागिताको गुणस्तर र प्रक्रियाको परीक्षण गर्न सहभागीतामूलक विकास सिद्धान्त र लैङ्गिक संरचनागत शक्ति सम्बन्धहरूको विश्लेषण गर्न लैङ्गिक तथा विकास सिद्धान्तको दृष्टिकोण अवलम्बन गरिएको छ । यसरी हेर्दा कानूनी प्रक्रिया पुरा गर्न महिलाहरूको संख्यात्मक उपस्थिति बढेको देखिएता पनि अर्थपूर्ण सहभागिताको स्तर भने कमजोर अर्थात् सतही मात्र देखिएको छ, जसलाई समावेशीताको एक किसिमको भ्रमको रूपमा पनि देख्न सकिन्छ । समाजमा गहिरो रूपमा रहेको पितृसत्तात्मक मानकहरू, भौतिक संरचनागत कठिनाई, घरायसी कामको अदृश्य बोझ, पारिवारिक जिम्मेवारी, सामाजिक अपेक्षा, विकासमा मानविय भन्दा बढी भौतिक संरचनाका प्राथमिकता, संस्थागत कमीकमजोरीहरू जस्ता अन्तःसंजालीय रूपमा जोडिएका बाधा अड्चनका कारणले महिलहरूको सहभागिताको अवस्था कमजोर देखिएको छ । साथै गुणात्मक सिपमूलक क्षमता विकासको कमी, उत्पादित वस्तुहरूको बजारीकरणको अभावका कारण दिगो विकासमा चुनौती रहेको पाईएको छ । यी सीमितताका बावजुद, अध्ययनले महिलाहरूका अन्तर्निहित क्षमता तथा सकारात्मक कानूनी प्रावधानका परिणाम स्वरूप सकारात्मक रूपमा महिला सहभागिता अभिवृद्धिको पथमा अघि बढिरहेको पाईएको छ ।

निष्कर्षमा अर्थपूर्ण सहभागिता हासिल गर्नका लागि कानूनी औपचारिकता पुरा गरेर मात्र पुग्दैन । यसका लागि बाधकको रूपमा रहेका संरचनागत अवस्थाको रूपान्तरण आवश्यक रहेको कुरा यो अध्ययनले देखाएको छ । साथै अध्ययनले स्थानीय विकासमा महिलाहरूको वास्तविक सहभागिता र उन्नतीका लागि समाजमा रहेको अनौपचारिक रूपमा विद्यमान अवस्थालाई चिन्न लैङ्गिक उत्तरदायी बजेटको व्यवस्था र सहि उपयोग, सिप मूलक क्षमता विकास, बजारीकरण र आर्थिक उन्नतिसँग जोडिएका कुरामा सशक्तिकरण र संस्थागत गरिनुपर्छ भन्ने पनि उजागर गरेको छ ।



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रामजी प्रसाद चौलागाईं  
उपाधि उम्मेदवार

२८ पुस २०८२

This dissertation, entitled *Women's Experience and Perception of Their Participation in the Development Process: An Interpretive Inquiry*, was presented by *Ramjee Prasad Chaulagain* on 12 January 2026.

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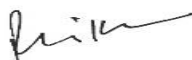
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I acknowledge and consent that my dissertation will be included in the permanent collection of the Kathmandu University Library. By signing below, I authorize the release of my dissertation to any reader for scholarly purposes upon request.



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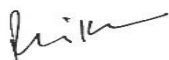
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## DECLARATION

I hereby affirm that this dissertation has not been previously presented, submitted, or published in part or full for any other candidate or institution.



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Ramjee Prasad Chaulagain

Degree Candidate

12 January 2026

## DEDICATION

Dedicated to the aspirant participants and my beloved life partner, Ms. Dhanisara Chapagain, whose support, encouragement, and unwavering understanding have been my strength throughout this work.

Also dedicated to my dear children, Er. Abhimat Chaulagain and Ms. Abhiruchi Chaulagain, whose boundless love and understanding have constantly motivated me to strive for excellence, and special thanks to my respected mother, Ms. Rohini Kumari Chaulagain, and father, Mr. Ganesh Prasad Chaulagain, whose tenacious support, guidance, and sacrifices have laid the foundation of my academic journey.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

CDHP	Community Development and Health Program
DDC	District Development Committee
GAD	Gender and Development
GESI	Gender Equality and Social Inclusion
GoN	Government of Nepal
GRB	Gender Responsive Budgeting
KUSOED	Kathmandu University School of Education
LGOA	Local Government Operation Act
LSGA	Local Self Governance Act
MoFAGA	Ministry of Federal Affairs & General Administration
MoFALD	Ministry of Federal Affairs and Local Development
MoLJPA	Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs
MoWCSC	Ministry of Women, Children, and Senior Citizens
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NLC	Nepal Law Commission
NPC	National Planning Commission
PLGSP	Provincial and Local Governance Support Program
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
TAF	The Asia Foundation
UNDP	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
VDC	Village Development Committee

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCING THE RESEARCH AGENDA

#### **Background**

From my journey in the development field, I have learned that women's participation is essential for achieving effective and sustainable development outcomes. For me, participation has always meant more than addressing legal provisions and showing the number of women in meetings. Women's meaningful engagement is to be in every stage of the development process, such as identifying needs, setting priorities, planning activities, allocating budgets, implementing programs, and sharing the benefits of development. I have come to understand that when women have a genuine voice, agency, and equitable access to development resources, societies become more just, inclusive, and harmonious as well (Kabeer, 1999).

During my professional job, I have observed several development projects that were failures due to the local conflicts. However, some pilot projects which were launched with women's active involvement implemented with no more conflicts, and they also succeeded highly. I was really impressed observing successful pilot projects that have active engagement of local women; the results were found to be very satisfactory socially and economically.

Nowadays women's inclusion is mandatory for local governance and development. It is high-sounding politically as well. In fact, I am mentioning here the meaningful participation of women in the development process. I want to understand women's perception and their lived experience of participating in the development process. Genuine participation necessitates actual influence in decisions and the capability to shape the developments that affect stakeholders' practical life (Arnstein, 1969; Cornwall, 2008). From my professional experience, I have observed that women's meaningful participation is the first step toward empowering them as active agents of change. I have learned that inclusive development is the current demand for social, political, and economic sustainability and harmonization.

Nepal's current constitutional and legal provisions and plan document frameworks also acknowledge this importance of women's participation. Let me take reference to the Fifteenth National Plan (2019/20-2023/24). It emphasized gender

equality and women's meaningful participation as central to inclusive and sustainable development (National Planning Commission [NPC], 2020). The fifteenth plan incorporated with priority on women's leadership, capability enhancement, and economic empowerment. Being a member states our country Nepal positioning itself with international commitments such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), 1979, and Sustainable Development Goal Five on gender equality (United Nations [UN], 2015). I observe it is grateful willpower. This commitment is only possible while women are actively participated in the local development process.

Let me discuss constitutional, legal, and policy provisions regarding women's inclusion in local governance. *The Constitution of Nepal, 2015*, has advanced and strengthened this groundwork by ensuring women's rights to proportional inclusion and participation in all state mechanisms (Nepal Law Commission [NLC], 2015). Following the Constitution, several laws, bylaws, and policies are promulgated. *The Local Government Operation Act, 2017*; *the Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Strategy, 2018*; and *the National Gender Equality Policy, 2021*, have endorsed women's leadership and meaningful roles in planning, decision-making, and implementation. I believe these provisions' emphasis is not only on increasing the number of women but also on ensuring meaningful participation, which means active engagement of women in the entire process of development. *The Local Level Election Act, 2017* ensures a minimum 40% female representation across local ward committees overall. It is my major concern for qualitative participation. I am linking it here because local governments have primary responsibility for local development, which serves as the foundation for national development.

I understand that real participation builds ownership of the people. However, the political context has influenced how participation takes place. Between 2002 and 2017, the absence of elected local bodies meant that bureaucrats governed local affairs, limiting citizen participation, including women's participation in local development processes (Gupta, 2021). I closely observed how affected development activities were during the armed conflict in Nepal. At that time, I was working as a social development officer in the District Development Committee (DDC), Lalitpur. At that time DDC was the leading political and administrative body of the entire district as mandated by the Local Self Governance Act, 1999 (Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs [MoLJPA], 1999). Based on my direct observational

experience, I found clearly that at that time people's participation was poor in the development process. I observed that just after the election of the local government body in 2017, there was a rebuilding of the participatory development process that had started with the evolution of the *Local Self Governance Act, 1999* (Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs [MoLJPA], 1999). I witnessed how the absence of elected representatives weakened participatory development practices, especially during the armed conflict when fear, insecurity, and instability pushed development activities aside. Women were affected in different ways and often lacked opportunities to participate. The new constitutional and legal provisions enhanced institutional commitments to women's empowerment and inclusive governance and development. Even with these positive legal provisions, my own prolonged experience has shown that the reality in the field does not always match policy expectations.

Throughout my professional journey, I have heard high-sounding advocacies regarding women's empowerment, yet I have often found the practical involvement of women in development processes very limited. As Arnstein (1969) described, participation without real power becomes a form of tokenism. Although many policies and programs highlight the importance of women's participation, the actual practice often remains far behind as per my observation during my professional life. International backgrounds also affirm that women's empowerment contributes to stronger governance, better community well-being, and international human rights (United Nations [UN], 2015). However, during my field observations, women's participation frequently appeared symbolic rather than substantive. Seeing such types of confusion between policies and practice, I became interested in undertaking this study. Through this interpretive inquiry study, I seek to learn how women experience and perceive their participation in local development processes and to understand the influencing reasons that shape their engagement. Regarding the process, there are different dimensions. Here I am talking, as I mentioned in the first paragraph, about finding the development needed to share the fruits of development. I want to examine the current situation in the local government and find the causes behind it.

### **Rationale of the Study**

Although national policies are considered effective for women's participation, supported by constitutional guarantees, local governance laws, and gender-responsive strategies, their participation continues to be limited and often symbolic. These

determined gaps have shaped my interest in understanding how women themselves experience participation in local development processes and what types of barriers continue to restrict their meaningful participation.

My experience has shown that women's participation cannot be understood only through fulfilling the legal requirements as numerical representation. They must be able to influence decision-making. Their contribution must be addressed appreciatively, and their participation should be meaningful throughout the entire development process. Nonetheless, there are many factors, such as traditional conservative gender norms, social structures, limited access to information, institutional constraints, educational factors, and unequal power exercises. Let me relate research findings, as women's empowerment depends not only on legal provisions but also on transforming the structures that shape their choices and opportunities (Cornwall, 2008; Kabeer, 1999). These insights resonate deeply with my professional observations, which range from the community level to the entire district level based on my experience.

### **Working Definition of Terms**

I have presented the following definitions to clarify the conceptual and operational boundaries of the key terminologies that are used in this research work. I believe these working definitions provide a consistent framework for interpreting the women's narratives. The working definitions ensure a clear distinction between immediate sensory interpretation and cumulative longitudinal understanding.

#### **Perception vs. Experience**

Understanding the difference between perception and experience is important, as this study focused on exploring women's perception and experience of their involvement in the development process at the local level. Merleau-Ponty (2012) defines the concept of perception as the participants' abrupt and individual understanding of a specific incidental transitory interpretation representing the immediate sensory contact with an event, while the experience is a cumulative process that integrates past and present circumstances with the meaning participants attribute to them (Dewey, 1938). In the paper, perception is defined as a woman's immediate understanding of a developmental action, persuaded by sensual interaction with a specific context. Similarly, experience is defined as a collective and progressive understanding that is expanded through sustained participation in the developmental process over time.

## **Development Process**

In this study, the ‘development process’ is referred to as the stages of development, such as development need identification and prioritization, planning with budgeting, and implementing at the rural municipal level (Bhusal, 2023). I have focused on women’s participation in planning forums and ward committees, user’s committees, and the municipal level and their actual participation over budget allocation and the implementation of development projects.

### **Statement of the Problem**

While international and national discourses have advocated participatory and inclusive development for decades, a significant gap continues between policy provisions and the real practice on the ground. Even with legal quotas, women's participation often remains confined to a symbolic or tokenistic presence. The marginalization of women in the development process is perpetuated by a development interchange of structural, social, cultural, and institutional barriers. Whereas women are progressively observable in formal settings, reaching as far as community-level meetings, ward committees, municipal boards, and assemblies. Dahal (2021) presents there is no meaningful participation of women in the political power exercise, economics resources, and sand development sectors in as policy intend. I believe that this type of physical manifestation rarely translates into meaningful participation or functional influence across decision-making. I want to examine the level of involvement in their role in decision influence as meaningful participation. I have seen these spaces frequently driven by legal quotas rather than a genuine establishing of women’s agency, resulting in women occupying passive voice and less effective roles. Subsequently, this form of inclusion fulfills legal requirements regarding numerical representation without genuinely shaping development priorities (Upreti et al., 2020). These academic observations are documented by my extensive professional experience within the development sector; having served in leading offices across the district, I have watched that the representation of women often remains weak, and generally women are present just to meet legal criteria, which undermines their potential contributions and perpetuates gender inequality in decision-making processes.

Women’s active engagement is generally documented as essential for strong democratic governance and inclusive development (Cornwall & Goetz, 2005). I believed and learned from my experience that women’s participation is essential for

good governance and sustainability. However, I find that persistent questions remain regarding why women participate less meaningfully than men. Why are their needs and demands often ignored, and why do extensive policy provisions fail to translate into real power? Such structural constraints are further compounded by educational deficits. Whereas studies constantly show that educational accomplishment enhances women's agency, confidence, and ability to engage in decision-making (Stromquist, 2015). I have seen many gender predispositions in rural communities, like my study site, often confine access to quality education for girls. This discrepancy reinforces a sense of inferiority and limits chances for the skill development needed for developmental engagement (Mahat, 2003). My understanding is that educational limitations interconnect social and cultural barriers to influence women's participation in the development process.

Current legal and policy provisions, such as the *Local Government Operation Act, 2017*, and the *Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Strategy, 2018*, mandate gender inclusion in planning, budgeting, and decision-making in local governance. Despite these instructions, they include requirements to distribute a certain percentage of development budgets to the target group, like marginalized women (Bhusal, 2023; Government of Nepal [GoN], 2017a). There are big questions about whether the proper utilization of the budget allocation is for genuine development or not. How do women perceive and experience the implication of the budget compared to the policy intention. I have observed many projects that are misinterpreted and manipulated. Budgets and resources proposed for women's empowerment are frequently diverted, and weak accountability, coupled with elite capture by politically or otherwise interested groups, limits the targeted benefits for marginalized women (Budhathoki & Silwal, 2025). I also have had bitter experiences with elites and interest groups manipulating targeted programs and budgets under the guise of helping deprived and marginalized groups. The policy practice gap makes women's frustration worse, contributing to the persistence of symbolic participation.

Based on my review, the majority of existing research is focused on federal or provincial indicators, providing quantitative assessments of representation without adequately exploring the lived experiences and perceptions of women in local development for their participation in the development process. I understand women's attachment to their participation lacks sufficient meaning, as do the challenges they encounter and the way the convergence of sociocultural, educational, and institutional

factors shapes their participation in the development process at the local level, which often results in limited influence on decision-making and resource allocation in their communities. I address this research gap by adopting an interpretive inquiry approach.

My research conceptualizes women's participation as influenced by current interrelated domains: structural, geographical distance, transportation, sociocultural barriers, educational deficits, institutional, and the policy practice gap. My aim in this research is to explore how women perceive and experience their role and participation in development processes in their rural municipality as one of the local governments.

### **Purpose of the Study and Research Questions**

Women's participation is highly emphasized in local-level development. Following the federal restructuring of Nepal, the local governments have emerged as a pivotal entity in driving national development (NPC, 2020). Local development serves as the foundation of national development, and it should have included women to ensure gender-friendly development through local governance. While national policy frameworks progressively mandate women's participation, a significant disparity remains between formal representation and substantive engagement. My study investigates the lived experience and perceptions of women as primary stakeholders for the sustainable local development. Present development practices underscore embedded social and cultural standards, structural barriers, and institutional constraints, which limit the meaningful participation of women in the development process at the local level.

In the setting of this research site, initial observations and discussions indicate that women's participation is often insufficient to presence rather than influence. While they attend development processes like meetings, consultations, and agenda setting, their potential to contribute to decision-making increases. The theoretical orientation of this research analyzes that women should participate in the entire development process, not only in women's issues, agendas, and concerns, but also in policy as intended.

Based on this context, I have chosen to explore lived experiences of women, how they personally interpret their participation, how they navigate sociocultural constraints, and how they perceive and negotiate the current legal promises and actual practice in their setting. I have chosen an interpretive inquiry approach that is therefore appropriate, as it allows the study to capture women's subjective meanings,

feelings, and interpretations of their participation in local development. To guide my inquiry, the following research questions were developed:

1. How do women perceive and experience their participation in local development processes?
2. How do women understand the major barriers that limit their meaningful participation in these processes?

### **Significance of Study**

This research holds considerable significance in understanding women's real experiences of participation in local development within the rural municipality. Despite Nepal's governance system highlighting women's meaningful participation, women continue to challenge restrictions that limit their meaningful participation in the development process. By examining the lived experiences of research participants. It offers important information about the practical realities that outline their participation.

Identifying these barriers provides evidence that can guide policymakers, local leaders, and development practitioners in making strategies that enhance women's roles and ensure that their priorities are recognized in decision-making processes.

Additionally, this research can contribute to academic and practical knowledge by exploring the gap between expected stages of women's participation guided by policies and the ground realities experienced in rural contexts. The study findings will be valuable for universities, research institutions, scholars, policymakers, planners, and implementers to strengthen gender equality in local governance. On an individual level, the study has developed my understanding of how women experience and perceive participation within the governance structure.

### **Delimitation**

This research work is delimited to a qualitative, interpretive exploration of women's experiences of participating in the development process within a rural municipality in Lalitpur District. The research does not pursue broad statistical generalization; instead, it aims to generate a deep, contextualized understanding of how a specific group of women experience, perceive, and interpret their participation in the local development process.

The study is conducted through in-depth interviews with twelve women participants who are directly experienced in local-level development activities within the municipality. Their accounts form the core data of the research, and the

involvements of women outside the group fall beyond the study's scope. The examination depends exclusively on qualitative methodologies and methods, not including comparative analysis with other rural municipalities. Defined by these boundaries, the findings reflect the lived experiences and perspectives of the selected women participants and are not intended to represent all women in the municipality, the district, or Nepal as a whole.

### **Chapter Organization**

My thesis is presented in seven sequential chapters that collectively provide a comprehensive description of my rationale, fieldwork, analysis, synthesized findings, implications, and reflection.

Chapter I focused on setting the research agenda, the research problems, and the purpose of the study; framed the research questions; and emphasized the significance of the study. Chapter II delves deeper into the study's rationale, drawing on discourses and empirical evidence about women's perception and experience of their participation in the development process through required literature reviewed. This chapter concluded through presenting the theoretical outline that directed the study. Chapter III focuses on the methodology of this research, posing detailed reasoning of the rationale for using an interpretive inquiry approach on it. It carefully outlines my research design, the selection of the research participants, and the tools and techniques that I used for data collection, interpretation, and analysis. Applying the methodology, in Chapter IV and Chapter V, I have presented data narration and analyzed the research questions by the detailed qualitative evidence derived from the fieldwork for the study. Then, Chapter VI, analysis and discussion, consolidates the study findings by making qualitative data through the thematic analysis. In this chapter I have discussed critically the findings across major thematic areas, with lived experiences and perceptions of the participant's realities aligning to the theories mentioned as in Chapter II. Conclusively, Summary, Conclusion, Implications, and Reflection, a comprehensive summary and conclusion of the thesis, articulate my research implications for the concerned sectors like policymakers, implementers, students, developmental institutions, and development experts, as well as facilitators and future researchers presented in Chapter VII.

### **Essence of the Chapter**

In this chapter, I have presented the introduction and background of my research agenda with a clearly established rationale for undertaking this study. I have

rationalized the problem by focusing on the persistent and significant gap between the legal policy for women's meaningful participation. Based on professional experience, women's participation in local development processes at the local government level is often adequate but primarily symbolic. Over the statement of the problem, I have presented interlocking structural, sociocultural, and institutional factors that constrain women's agency, often relegating their involvement in governance to tokenistic roles. I want to examine such problems of the ground reality with the live experience and perception of the local women. I have outlined the purpose and objectives of my study, framed the specific research questions that guide the consequent analysis, and clarified the significance of this study for advancing both policy implementation and academic knowledge in the field of participatory development through the women's participation perspective.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I have presented a study of the frame of literature relevant to my research, organized into five sections: thematic review, theoretical review, policy review, empirical review, and research gaps. The discussion draws on documents and studies aligned with the research objectives, focusing on women's perception and experience of their participation in the development process. The review focused on the fact that meaningful participation of women in development requires a clear understanding of development and women's participation. It further explores theories related to participatory development and gender development. I also analyzed existing policy provisions, their implementation in practice, and the gaps between policy intentions and practices in the field. Finally, it reviews empirical studies to assess the current state of research on women's participation and to identify the gaps that this study seeks to address.

#### **Thematic Review**

In this section, I have discussed various themes related to women's participation in the development process. Let me start to present my understanding through the dimensions of participation and then relate it to the women's perspective. The review highlights how women's participation is influenced by power relations, socio-cultural norms, and existing practices that limit their engagement.

#### **Dimensions of Participation**

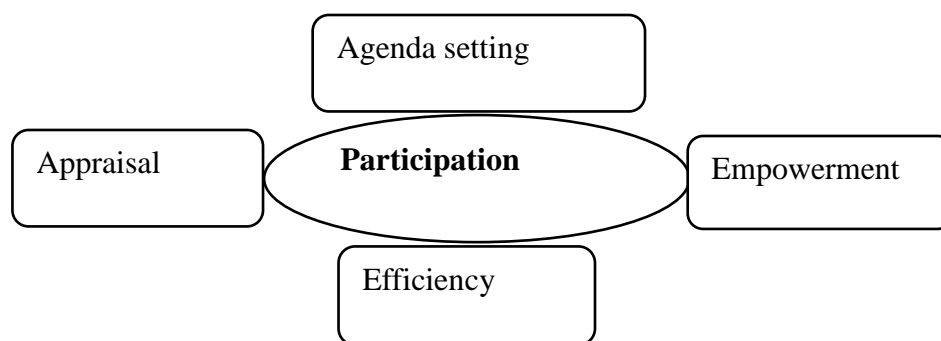
Let me present some significant dimensions of participation. Here my concern is for qualitative participation, not merely quantitative or numerical attendance. Effective involvement should entail the meaningful participation of women, going beyond their passive attendance at decision-making processes related to development. Carroll (2006) delivers a foundational model describing participatory design as the active presence of stakeholders across five critical dimensions: the areas of human activity, the roles of stakeholders, the types of shared design representations, the scope and duration of interactions, and the engagement of users in project activity. For me, women's participation is to be ensured as major stakeholders in the process of development rather than symbolic presences in need-based agenda setting to

implementation procedures. For women, these dimensions hold important implications for counteracting entrenched gender roles and power imbalances. As Carroll (2006) states, focusing on women's needs involves examining the fields where they historically lack voice and ensuring their stakeholder roles guarantee decision-making authority. Willis (2005) highlights the importance of focusing specifically on the development sector, stating that participation occurs in various forms at different stages of the development process. He emphasizes that achieving genuine participation requires moving away from outsider knowledge and control to local government, structured upon approaches like Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) (Chambers, 1997). Willis defines four crucial dimensions of participation within development: appraisal, agenda setting, empowerment, and efficiency. I perceive an accurately participatory setting for women; the development agenda must be set by them, moving their roles from passive recipients to active stakeholders.

Analyzing these outlines, the concept of women's participation is understood not as a singular event but as an entire system well-defined by its underlying values, structural components, contextual boundaries, and envisioned outcomes. This framework provides the tools required to analyze to what extent women are genuinely involved in the development process. Based on the above discussion, I have drawn the following diagram to present the four dimensions on a diagram:

**Figure 1**

*Dimensions of Participation*



(Willis, 2005)

The first dimension, an appraisal, is understanding the community and their developmental needs, for example, PRA as discussed above. The second dimension is agenda setting. Under this dimension is the involvement of the community in decisions about the development policies, consultations, and strategies, listening from

the start, not brought in once policy has been decided upon. The third dimension is efficiency, which ensures that community people participate in development projects and productivity. Willis presents building schools as an example of building schools. The fourth dimension is empowerment, which means participation leads to greater self-awareness, confidence, and contribution to development democracy.

### **Understanding of Women's Participation**

For me, participation is meaningful involvement in the development process. As I mentioned, there are significant dimensions in the development process. I have noticed that as Robert Chambers identified a gender bias, where development professionals tend to consult men, the more visible and articulate members of the community, while overlooking women, who are often marginalized or relegated to the isolated sphere (Chambers, 1997). He highlights that real participation requires a kind effort to host this bias and to create spaces where women can share their understanding and experiences. Chambers argues that empowering women to participate is not merely an ethical imperative but a practical necessity for accurate and effective development planning, as their insights on household responsibilities, like childcare, and resource management are often critical to the success and sustainability of any involvement. My understanding of Chambers's approach to women's participation in development is not located on a dedicated gender theory but is a critical section of his broader philosophy of putting the last first.

Let me draw some ideas from Sherry Arnstein's seminal 1969 work. Like Arnstein's article, *A Ladder of Citizen Participation*, it offers a powerful and enduring framework for understanding the relationship between participation and inclusive development. The ladder spans from non-participation to sincere civilian control. Arnstein argues that real participation is not just lightly involving citizens, meaning stakeholders, in a process; it should influence the decision-making process. The lower rungs of the ladder, such as manipulation and therapy, represent what she defined as nonparticipation, where the real objective is to educate the people into supporting a predetermined agenda, rather than to genuinely include their participation. While changing the steps of the process, such as notifying, meeting, and conciliation, one enters the sphere of tokenism, where women are accepted to voice their views, but the fundamental control of decisions remains in the grip of the powerholders. For Arnstein, authentic inclusive development only begins at the level of partnership, delegated power, and citizen control, where marginalized communities have a real say

in how resources are allocated, goals are set, and programs are implemented.

Arnstein's work is crucial for any discussion of inclusive development because it forces a critical evaluation of whether participatory initiatives are merely symbolic or genuine avenues for empowering the have-nots to influence the decisions that affect their lives (Arnstein, 1969).

### **Equitable Women Participation in Development**

Development is basically a process that should be gender balanced; however, global evidence consistently shows that women's participation remains judgmentally limited. This inequity has significant consequences. As per the argument of Mahat (2003), women's equal participation is essentially significant for inclusive and sustainable development. During my long period working in the development field and a long period in several rural communities, I have seen there are big inequalities at the grassroots level. However, structural barriers rooted in gender discrimination, such as men's preferences, undermined women's equitable participation. Nutsugbodo and Mensah (2020) further highlight this paradox: while women are critical to sustainable development, these persistent socio-cultural obstacles continue to control their meaningful participation at the local level. I strongly believe, with my professional experience, women should be empowered in an affirmative way for meaningful participation in the local development process.

### **Theoretical Review**

In qualitative research, theory functions as a guide to the knowledge production process and provides a complex, comprehensive conceptual understanding of the underlying social dynamics, institutional operations, and interaction patterns within a given context (van Manen, 1997). In this study, I have delineated two major theories that provide analytical context for understanding the nature of women's participation. These theories include participatory development (TPD) and gender and development (GAD) theory.

### **Participatory Development Theory**

The theory of participatory development is a practical approach that emerged in the 1970s as a direct challenge to traditional, top-down models of development that often led to unjustifiable developments that failed to address real community needs (Chambers, 1997). I am very inspired by this theoretical approach. I also have experience working with both approaches. While I started my professional journey, I worked guided by the principle of the top-down approach with the core assumption of

the trickle-down belief of development. After a few years of experience with it, I came to learn about the new paradigm shift from the nineties. The core argument of PDT is that for any initiative to be successful, ethical, and sustainable, the intended beneficiaries, the primary stakeholders, must be actively involved in all stages of the process, from initial planning and design to final evaluation (Reed et al., 2018). When I understood the significance of empowerment for local people's participation with the validation of local knowledge, skill, and experiences, I positioned them as the primary stakeholders for their development. I learned that this approach promotes sustainability through local ownership and development.

I find one of the roots of the theory of participation is significantly aligned with arguments of Paulo Freire (1970). Freire presents the concept of critical realization, arguing that genuine deliverance and development occur when marginalized people become critically conscious of their socio-political reality and take action to convert it. Developing on this philosophical underlying, Chambers (1997) championed approaches such as Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), which aims to put the last first through encouraging local people to administer their own analysis and planning, applying their ideas for the development. The theoretical approach has significantly shaped my professional perspective, understanding, and approach to the development process. My experience guides me to believe that development professionals could facilitate the local people's initiatives rather than imposing external ideas as so-called development experts; it is aligned with Chambers' argument on the capabilities of local people. Learning from this principle, I always tried to be a development facilitator rather than a development expert or consultant. As mentioned by Chamber (1997), to be honest, I would find it very uneasy if someone called me a development expert, as my core value aligns with

The fruitful application of the theory of participatory development breaks on several interdependent principles: people's empowerment, which includes consolidation of skills, awareness, and confidence of community members to handle cooperative action (Freire, 1970). Inclusion and equity, which require deliberate efforts to ensure marginalized communities. Absence of enabling conditions like political will and transparency means that participation risks being reduced to a tokenistic exercise (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). The fundamental implication of PDT is aligned to my study. Therefore, I want to use this framework to measure the quality of women's engagement, diagnosing the gap between the theoretical ideal of shared

control and the observed reality of symbolic presence (Acharya, 2017; Hussein, 2021).

### **Gender and Development Theory**

The Gender and Development (GAD) Theory arose in the late 1980s as a significant theoretical evolution from the earlier Women in Development (WID) paradigm. The central postulation of GAD is that gender is a socially constructed, not a biological, thing. This situation states the inequalities and discriminations between men and women are formed, reinforced, and preserved by social controls and orthodox institutions (Reeves & Baden, 2000). Consequently, GAD shifts the focus from women as an isolated group to the socially constructed relationships between men and women, arguing that sustainable development is only possible through the transformation of these unequal power relations (Kabeer, 1994).

The core view of the gender and development approach is the distinction between practical gender needs and strategic gender interests. This theoretical approach suggests a critical lens for my research work. It highlights how to examine deeply rooted social, cultural, structural, and institutional barriers that limit women's participation and moving forward.

### **Theoretical Framework**

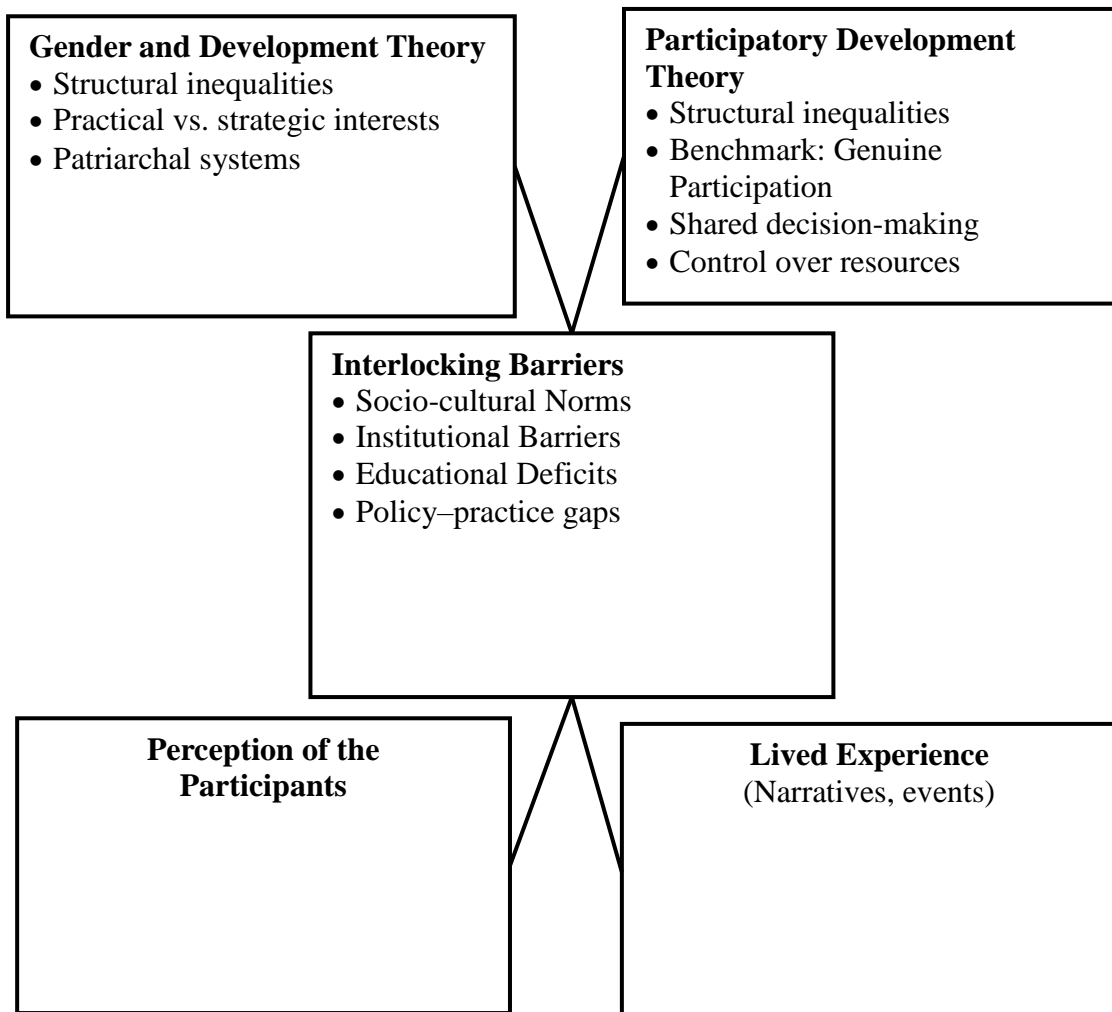
My theoretical framework is the synthesis of PDT and GAD, delivering the essential analytical support to define the problem of tokenism and interpreting the findings connected to structural barriers. The fundamental premise of Participatory Development Theory is that development interventions are only effective, ethical, and sustainable when local members are actively involved, ensuring genuine ownership (Chambers, 1997). Participatory Development Theory is central to describing my research problem because it allows me to assess the quality of participation. The theory is important for diagnosing why women's participation remains figurative rather than transformative. My worry is that women have a presence physically, but their influence is limited in decision-making for development at the local level, as pointed out by Acharya (2022). Therefore, this theory serves as the standard for identifying the tokenistic nature of participation and the underlying causes of women's lower participation in the development process.

Significantly, the Gender and Development Theory specifies the necessary critical lens to examine the structural roots of gender exclusion. GAD's core premises highlight the importance of addressing structural inequalities and strategic gender

interests in describing my problem. GAD allows me to interpret the multiple, interlocking factors that serve as barriers to women's participation, such as socio-cultural factors, economic status, psychological aspects, and current policy provisions. The theory justifies my focus on how these elements, all of which I believe are critically interrelated with education, systematically impede women's ability to move from fulfilling practical needs (holding a quota seat) to achieving strategic interests by exercising real power. GAD, therefore, provides the analytical framework to diagnose the systemic reasons for the observed exclusion.

In this study, I want to understand that women's participation in the development process falls under the participatory development approach, which aligns with gender perspective. My core concern is that development should be gender-friendly and participative. As per the above discussion, women are seen as backward and deprived. That might cause exclusion in the development process. There are different factors as barriers and challenges for women's participation, such as demography, sociocultural factors, economic status, psychological aspects, and current policies and plans; all the components are interrelated to education. I believe education can play a vital role in empowering women by addressing all those elements and sub-elements. Based on the above discussion, let me present a theoretical framework.

My theoretical framework reflects how I understand women's meaningful participation in local development by bringing together two core theories: Participatory Development Theory and Gender and Development Theory. These theories helped me to examine how women's participation often sounds high-flown in policies but remains limited in practice. The framework shows how socio-cultural norms, educational limitations, institutional structures, and the gap between policy and practice influence how women perceive and experience their participation. At the center of the framework are women's perceptions and lived experiences, which guide my research work. The entire analysis is shaped by an interpretive research paradigm supported by qualitative inquiry.

**Figure 2***Theoretical Framework*

(Moser, 1993; Willis, 2005)

Let me describe it in this framework, aligning to my problem statement and research questions. As I described above, those two theories guide me for this research work. The Participatory Development Theory helps me to understand what meaningful participation should examine like in terms of shared decision-making, empowerment, and local development processes (Chambers, 1997). In contrast, Gender and Development Theory provides a lens to examine power relations and structural inequalities that often restrict women’s agencies in development (Moser, 1993). I have seen inequalities from the family level to society and institutions.

Using these theories, I interpret how four major contextual barriers limit women’s participation in practice. The traditional social and cultural norms and values, practices with patriarchal attitudes and domestic work burdens persist to limit

women's self-confidence (Parajuli & Neupane, 2025). Because of low education awareness, lack of professional skill minimizes women's empowerment to participate efficiently in development processes (Malhotra & Schuler, 2005). I believe awareness and self-efficacy is most important, I observed that some women even they do not have formal education, they are participated effectively. According to Sapkota (2024), systemic problems, elite capture of the resources and male-centric power exercises, limit women's access to the spaces where key decisions are presented. I believe that local community people should be aware about the significance of real needy women should be participated in local development. Policy and practice gaps show that although quotas and legal provisions exist, real power is rarely transferred to women at the local level. Real participatory process support to implement the existing legal and policy provision effectively.

Elements at the core of the framework are women's perceptions and lived experiences, which are directly connected to my research questions. I focus on how women feel, understand, and describe their participation. My research participant's narratives help me understand whether their presence in meetings and committees is meaningful or symbolic. Surrounding the entire model is the interpretive paradigm, which reflects my methodological stance. Since I aim to understand how women make sense of their participation, interpretive inquiry supported by in-depth interviews helps me explore their personal meanings, emotions, and reflections (van Manen, 1997). This theoretical framework helps me connect to the theories, situation, and lived experience to understand why women's participation remains limited despite well-defined constitutional, legal, and policy commitments.

### **Policy Review**

This study emphasizes the gap between policy mandates for women's participation and their lived experience of meaningful involvement in the local development process. Pursuant to the political transition and federal restructuring mandated by *the Constitution of Nepal, 2015*, the government applied a comprehensive legal and strategic agenda intended to foster gender equality and inclusive governance, focusing on women's empowerment. Legislative instruments such as *the Local Government Operation Act, 2017*, and the *Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) Strategy, 2018*, systematically endeavor to institutionalize women's representation across all levels of planning and decision-making (GoN, 2018). I find there are several protective measures kept with positive assumptions.

I believe that establishing this strong legal and policy baseline is essential to contextualize my inquiry. Therefore, this section reviews these key policy documents, including the Constitution, the LGOA, the GESI paradigm, and *the Fifteenth National Plan*, to articulate the state's comprehensive commitment to achieving substantive women's participation, against which the actual experiences and persisting barriers identified in my interpretive inquiry will be critically analyzed.

### **Global and National Plan Directives**

The national plan's agenda is heavily informed by the global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal five (Gender Equality), which confirms gender equality as both a fundamental human right and a precondition for sustainable progress (UN, 2015). The SDGs, which considered women's agenda and leadership, are vital to achieving development impact. In our transition to a federal structure, the integration of the SDGs into the 15th Plan provides a strong national mandate to promote women's participation in development (UN, 2015). I find this alignment crucial because it provides the principal strategic justification for promoting women's roles in local development.

### **Constitutional Provisions: Policy vs. Women's Participation**

By reviewing the constitutional and legal landscape, I find that *the Constitution of Nepal, 2015*, offers one of the most broad-minded and comprehensive foundations for promoting women's participation in development (NLC, 2015). Here my understanding is that the Constitution is not only a legal document; it is a profound political commitment to converting into an inclusive society, a signal committed by the Preamble's promise to end discrimination. I find in the fundamental rights section a strong constitutional backing for women's participation. Article 18 of the constitution ensures gender equality. The constitution ensures eliminating gender-based discrimination and authorizing the nation to implement special measures for women's inclusion and participation. Likewise, the provision of Article 38 granted exclusively to women's rights. It mandates the proportional inclusion of women within all the components.

Regarding the local governance provisions, I find concrete mechanisms that operationalize women's representation. The Constitution openly links gender inclusion to the machinery of local development by authorizing women's participation within the decision-making bodies of governance. The provision guarantees that women hold a definite role in the executive body. It makes them responsible for

implementing local policies and budgets, thereby institutionalizing women's role in driving and determining the development agenda at the local level.

My understanding is that the constitutional guidelines establish a strong legal substance designed to enable women's transition from symbolic representation toward sincere encouragement in development processes. I notice that intellectuals also emphasize the transformative potential of these provisions. Tamang (2018) claims that the Constitution commits gender equality as an operational component of the nation. Budhathoki and Silwal (2025) argue that the mandatory representation requirements are precisely designed to correct historical exclusion in development.

As I stated, merely formulating policies and counting numbers to satisfy the provisions does not constitute genuine participation in achieving development goals. The central concern of my study is the researchers' reflection that a symbol alone does not ensure meaningful participation. Basnet and Ishiyama (2024) argue that contempt for constitutional reservation, deeply rooted patriarchal norms, inadequate access to political grooming, and patriarchal structures often limit women's capability to apply substantive power. I want to relate an argument that the application of citizenship provisions by the name of the mother is still limited by patriarchal institutional biases against the constitutional provision (Budhathoki, 2025). Let me justify this with examples; for instance, without citizenship, individuals cannot participate in any development initiatives.

Overall, my review of the Constitution shows that Nepal has created a strong legal basis for promoting women's participation in development. I understand these provisions as signaling both development and ongoing challenges. The importance of my study is to examine how such constitutional commitments translate into the actual lived experiences and perceived barriers to meaningful participation in development processes, directly addressing my research questions.

### **Local Government Operation Act 2017**

Building upon the wide-ranging constitutional assurances of proportional inclusion for women established in the previous section of the constitution, now let me examine the specific legislative instruments intended to operationalize the mandates for the local government. The declaration of the *Local Government Operation Act, 2017*, denotes the primary legal framework for devolving power within the federal structure. I believe that the judiciary effectively serves as the practical mechanism that translates constitutional vision into reality. The act provides

provisions such as gender-responsive development planning and budgeting and mandated executive roles. The mandatory provision of the act ensures that women are centrally focused on local development (Government of Nepal [GoN], 2017a). Providing such a strong legal construction, the Act enables women's engagement to move from the symbolic representation to the substantive participation required for transformative development (Ojha, 2019).

I understand a key feature of *the Local Government Operation Act, 2017*, is its strong set of provisions for mandated representation. The Act requires gender parity in the top executive positions, stipulating that the mayor/chairperson and deputy mayor/vice chairperson must be from different genders (GoN, 2017b). The Local Government Operation Act mandates the inclusion of at least two women members in the ward committee. In addition, one woman must be included from the Dalit among women. According to Timilsina (2020), this structural arrangement is crucial because it provides women with a legitimate platform to voice community needs and influence policy, which I see as essential for moving their participation from the margins to the mainstream of local governance.

Beyond mere representation, I find that the act establishes clear mechanisms for gender-responsive planning and budgeting. Section twenty-four of the Act compels local governments to formulate plans that integrate values of Gender Equality and Social Inclusion. It guides local government to allocate a significant portion of their development budget to targeted agendas for women. It legally allows elected women to promote and protect resources for projects addressing exact women's needs, such as economic empowerment and other significant development agendas (Adhikari & Sijapati, 2021). Moreover, the formation of judicial subcommittees is coordinated by the deputy mayor or vice-chairperson. The act is seen as more supportive of women's participation in local governance settings. which directly informs my research questions about meaningful participation. There is a question about the implementation of the legal provisions that are ensured by the act of whether it is meaningful or remains limited. Despite the promulgation of progressive legal provisions for women's participation, researchers point out that newly elected women representatives often face profound challenges stemming from patriarchal social norms, limited developmental experience, and inadequate administrative support (Acharya, 2022). As per the findings, I have also observed very limited participation by women in development activities. Women's capacity to

effectively navigate complex budgetary and planning processes can be severely limited without targeted capacity building and modification in the dominant political culture. Therefore, I conclude that the *Local Government Operation Act, 2017*, delivers a unique legal basis for women's participation. The act of presence, its accomplishment in encouragement, and genuine influence depend upon effective implementation. Such a gap between the policy potential and the ground reality of application is exactly what my research is designed to explore.

### **Policy for Gender Equality and Social Inclusion**

I reviewed the implementation of Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) as a fundamental standard that represents a landmark approach to national development. This background moves beyond earlier, more limited policies like Women in Development (WID) by providing a holistic lens to understand and address the intersecting forms of discrimination (Sijapati & Subedi, 2020). The Government of Nepal officially established a framework to explain how to inclusively and equitably follow the constitutional provisions to create actionable policies (Ministry of Women, Children and Senior Citizens [MOWCSC], 2020). In this study on women's perception and experience of their participation in development processes, it is very significant to analyze policy intent and practical reality in the rural municipality setting as a local government perspective.

My perception of the GESI policy discloses its predominant vision and prescriptive basis. I understand the policy as reframing women's participation not merely as a rights-based subject but as a requirement for achieving effective, equitable, and sustainable development.

To achieve the vision, the government of Nepal launched inclusive policies such as the *Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Strategic Operational Guideline*. The policy guideline provided some important elements and compulsory processes, focusing on women's empowerment at local governments. It helps to analyze, allocate, and track resources based on benefits to women and targeted social groups (MoFAGA, 2021). Moreover, the policy instructs to command the use of gender and social to analyze women's inclusion in the development process effectively.

Researchers identify key challenges, including a lack of technical GESI capacity among local officials, bureaucratic inertia, and resistance to transforming traditional power structures (The Asia Foundation [TAF], 2019). I perceive that deep-seated patriarchal customs and social hierarchies remain to act as challenging barriers,

limiting the ability of women to participate (Adhikari, 2021). Therefore, I conclude that the GESI framework is an important legal and strategic foundation to realize its transformative potential for meaningful involvement.

### **National Plan: Key Strategies for Women**

I find the *Fifteenth National Plan for 2019/20–2023/24*, which guides the government's medium-term strategy toward a prosperous Nepal and happy Nepali, to be highly applicable. The plan emphasizes gender equality as an essential principle of social justice and sustainable development (NPC, 2020). I am impressed to find another significant policy provision, as Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) strategies at the national level have shifted from gender-neutral frameworks. It is very important to have gender-transformative interventions that target the structural roots of exclusion in local development and governance as well. It mandated as key strategic priorities the institutionalization of gender-responsive budgeting to ensure meaningful participation of women in development (UN Women, 2022). Moreover, these policies emphasize the removal of legal barriers to land and asset ownership while expanding care infrastructure to improve the voluntary household workloads, which traditionally restrict women's mobility and participation in the public sphere and development activities. The policy strategies mandate for integrating sex-disaggregated data and intersectional analysis. These strategies aim to move beyond tokenistic participation to a perfect substantive agency where women actively structure the local development agenda (United Nations Development Program [UNDP], 2022). I perceive that it adopts an intersectional method, recognizing the various realities and needs of women across social, economic, and geographic contexts, thus reflecting global commitments like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

### **Fundamental Strategies for Women's Participation in Development**

As per understanding the fifteenth national plan of Nepal, it asserts significant strategies planned to empower women and move their participation beyond mere passive attendance. The strategies focus on economic enabling, active political involvement, and women's status by expanding their access to resources. It announces programs for women's entrepreneurship through skill development (NPC, 2020). The plan is for political participation and leadership development. Addressing the constitutional guarantees, the plan emphasizes capacity building and leadership development among elected women representatives at all tiers of government that

support to enable them to perform development planning and decision-making. I perceive this strategy as a straightforward attempt to transfer towards functional participation, where women effectively influence policies and decision-making. Such legal provision is significant to align with my research purpose and analysis of the finding of how these provisions are implemented in the field of local government settings through the rural municipality.

My review of the constitutional, legislative and concerned policies reveal that Nepal has created robust policy instruments supporting women's participation in local development. These documents collectively establish strong mandates for gender parity, ensuring women's descriptive presence in decision-making bodies and explicitly setting the goal of moving toward substantive representation and influence. Based on my review, findings show lags on policies execution. As per my understanding, deeply rooted socio-cultural practices, patriarchal norms, and institutional disinterest are repeatedly cited as fundamental barriers that hinder the effective execution of these progressive legal provisions. It concurrently strengthens the essential evidence of my research work. My subsequent analysis examines critically how women personally experience these policy promises and through existing barriers that limit their ability to achieve meaningful participation guaranteed by these progressive policies.

### **Empirical Review**

In Nepal, there has been robust legal and policy architecture (Constitution 2015, LGOA 2017, GESI strategy 2021, the Fifteenth Plan) guaranteeing women's representation in local development. This shift is essential because while policy documents articulate the theoretical commitments for inclusive governance, empirical research consistently highlights a persistent gap between these mandates, and the actual lived experiences of women. Therefore, the focus of this review is to synthesize existing empirical studies that directly address my two core research questions: the perceived and experienced quality of women's involvement and the tangible barriers limiting their meaningful participation. I created a section with key themes identified in literature, which focus the challenges of translating formal attendance into sincere involvement in development.

#### **Standard of Participation: Attendance Versus Engagement**

My understanding of the empirical literature specifies a reliable finding: despite mandatory allocations leading to high expressive representation often remains

symbolic or tokenistic rather than substantive. Studies following the 2017 local elections empirically documented such inequality as (Sapkota, 2024). He explores that while women representatives exactly fulfill their mandate of attending meetings, their actual ability to contribute to key strategic decisions regarding planning, budgeting, and resource allocation is significantly. Mainly women presented as ceremonial roles such as scrubbing campaigns some of the specific social programs, in that way marginalizing them from vital and economic development.

Many researchers suggest that the agendas specifically designed to empower women, such as GESI responsive budgeting, often face systemic resistance. As Dhungana et al. (2021) documented instances where allocated budget in women sector is either diverted to non-gender specific projects or were managed without the substantive input of elected women representatives. With this I understand that the policy mandates revised earlier, such as the *Local Government Operation Act, 2017*, often fail at the implementation step due to rooted institutional and patriarchal power dynamics. This empirical indication of tokenism, marginalization, and lack of substantive influence serves to establish the fundamental need for my research, that seeks to understand how women personally perceive and navigate such types of gaps in their involvement.

### **Socio Cultural Barriers to Meaningful Participation**

To analyze my second research question on major barriers, I need to find that socio-cultural factors constitute a challenging constraint on women participate meaningfully. The reviewed literature shows that traditional and patriarchal setting restrict women's activities and agency. Khatri and Paudel (2025) empirically explored that male partners and community people often dismiss women's policy provisions, linking their lack of capacity to a supposed lack of competency. For me, these findings confirm that the formal rights guaranteed by policy are often negated by informal, deep deep-rooted societal expectations that restrict women's public sphere mobility and knowledgeable contribution.

### **Institutional and Political Limitations**

Outside cultural norms, the experimental review highlights critical institutional and political limitations within the local governance structure itself that act as fences. I perceive wide-ranging documentation of resistance from male political leaders who are unwilling in decision making authority, efficiently gatekeeping to core development processes (Bhul, 2022). In addition, many newly elected women,

particularly those fulfilling quota requirements, enter office without adequate administrative and political experience. I understand this complexity as creating an exclusionary setting where women struggle to fully hold and influence on the processes.

I perceive that the literature successfully identifies and documents the presence of the gap between policy presence and meaningful participation in development process, alongside the structural and cultural types of barriers. Nevertheless, a significant scholarly gap remains concerning the subjective dimension. While existing studies confirm that women are marginalized, they often fail to capture how women personally interpret their engagement, what subjective meanings they attach to navigating these complex barriers, and how they perceive the failure of the policy promises in their daily municipal work. Therefore, the confirmed policy practice gap and the documented prevalence of socio cultural and institutional barriers collectively establish the essential background for my interpretive inquiry. My research will move beyond documenting the gap to exploring the lived experiences and subjective analyses that drive women's participation in the face of these constraints.

### **Research Gap**

Although many studies have documented Nepal's progressive legal framework and the significant increase in women's descriptive representation in local governments (Manandhar, 2021), I find that a crucial gap remains in understanding the qualitative nature of women's participation. Much of the existing literature focuses on numbers how many women are elected or represented while paying far less attention to how women themselves experience participation. The subjective senses, contests, and chances that shape their engagement, principally in rural municipalities, are not satisfactorily explored. This is exclusively important in settings where male-controlled customs, inadequate access to resources, and structural constraints continue to influence women's capability to participate in development process.

I understand that intersectional factors such as caste, ethnicity, and social status are discussed superficially the research what I found. These dimensions affect women's level of confidence and their ability to influence decisions (George, 2020). Likewise, there is limited scholarly insight into whether increased numerical representation has translated into substantive stimulus on development priorities, budgets, and policies (K.C., 2024). I find another gap in the examination of the role of

political parties: while parties are central to candidate selection and decision making, their support to elected women after they assume office remains under researched (Khatri & Paudel, 2025).

Specified these gaps, I believe my research is essential to move beyond counting women in political spaces to analyzing the quality, depth, and meaning of their participation based on their live experience. Such an approach can help identify conditions that transform women's presence from symbolic to genuinely influential, contributing to inclusive and gender responsive local development.

## CHAPTER III

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive approach to explore the lived experiences and perspectives of women's participation in the local development process. Focusing on it examines current practices of women's participation, their perceptions of development, and their roles as contributors to local development process. Central aims are to identify women's perspective on development and their participation and to find out major barriers that hinder women's active involvement in local development. Grounded in a non-positivist, humanistic worldview, this research recognizes that realities are multiple, socially built, and shaped through interaction. Knowledge is seen as co-created between the researcher and participants, a stance that outlines the study's ontology, epistemology, axiology, and informs its design, data assortment, and analysis.

In possession with qualitative research principles, the research arranges respectful, direct engagement with participants as essential for understanding of social realities. In depth interviews are applied to capture the nuanced and layered perceptions of local women (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1995). I acknowledge these perspectives may sometimes be conflicting, requiring careful understanding whereas maintaining ethical accountability. Eventually, the findings aim to contribute not only to academic discourse but also to practical policymaking strategies, planning to strengthen gender equality and foster more gender inclusive development at local level governance system.

#### **Philosophical Stance**

My worldview is research as more than just a mechanical task of data gathering; it is a profound philosophical journey. My research work of women's perceptions and experiences of the development process in one of the Rural Municipalities, my investigation is entrenched in a qualitative, interpretive paradigm, which undertakes that reality is socially constructed and varies on the specific setting. As a substitute of looking for one objective truth, I aim to involve with the various perspectives of women whose lived experiences shape my understanding of their roles

in development process. As the non-positivist approach, it arranges depth and sense over broad aspects, recognizing that philosophical assumptions guide my research process.

Let me talk regarding my ontological position, my ontological position is grounded in relativism which is that there is not a single, objective reality. Instead, I align the view that reality is a social and local construct, emerging from the diverse lived experiences of individuals (Lincoln & Guba, 2011). In the context of my study, it means valuing the subjective reality of women regarding development initiatives. Accordingly, I recognize that multiple realities exist, constructed by social context, cultural measures, governance system, and personal backgrounds. My objective is not to quantify an external truth, but to understand the specific meanings participants provide to their parts, prospects, and challenges within their own context.

My epistemological stance brings into line with the interpretivist credence that knowledge is subjective and context-bound (Merriam, 2009). My research on women's perception and experience on participation of development, I aim to find the factors determining local women's participation in development process. Stranded of a non-positivist paradigm, I understand knowledge to be co-constructed through interpretive engagement with participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I come to know emerges through in-depth interviews with participants lived understandings. As a researcher, my role is to interpret the varied meanings to develop a nuanced understanding of the dynamics that empower or constrain for women's participation in development.

Finally, my axiology mirrors the values and ethical stance. In qualitative research, the researcher's principles influence the process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). My position is grounded in assurance to equality, admiration for participants' expressions, and co-creation of knowledge that contributes to intended development outcomes. As Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue, research is never value-free. I perceive that my interpretations are designed by my own principles about gender balanced development. This consciousness guides my ethical adoptions, guaranteeing that the research process itself upholds the self-respect, agency, and perspectives of the participants who share their experience.

Organized, these ontological, epistemological, and axiological commitments form a unified background that informs not only what I study, but how and why I did it.

### **Interpretive Inquiry Approach**

My research follows an interpretive inquiry approach to explore women's perception and experience of participation in development process at local level development government. Based on the paradigm this research emphasizes understanding how individuals construct meaning from their own experiences within specific social contexts. According to van Manen (1997), interpretive inquiry emphasizes uncovering the spirit of lived experience through philosophical interpretation. The choice of interpretive inquiry over phenomenological inquiry occurred a considered methodological choice, not a trouble of practical effortlessness. While phenomenology habitually takes a collective substance by 'bracketing' outward controls, my study needed a lens of the eye able of method of accounting for the peculiar socio-cultural, political and institutional circumstances of the local government settings. Interpretive Inquiry grants for a 'hermeneutic' incorporation of the participants' descriptions with the fundamental realisms of local governance, which a descriptive phenomenological approach would have overseen. These viewpoints provide a ground reality exploring women's experiences in development process, context bound and shaped by their connections to the social structures. In this study, the interpretive inquiry regarding the power dynamics of women's participation is framed such that these dynamics are positioned as social constructs rather than rigid formal frameworks. By utilizing Interpretive Inquiry, my research decodes the subjective meanings of women's experiences and perceptions, identifying how power is practically exercised through dynamics like patriarchal gatekeeping and institutional neglect at local government settings.

Merriam (2009) clarifies that qualitative research within the interpretive paradigm aims to understand meaning as it is constructed by individuals, knowing that the researcher attends as the principal instrument of data collection and interpretation. This method requires reflexivity, as the researcher's understandings and interpretations are part of the meaning making process. In this research, I applied this interpretive stance by maintaining close assignment with participants and reflecting on how my own experiences in the development field partial data interpretation.

To confirm methodological rigor and credibility, I also drew on Yin's (2014) principles for handling qualitative data methodically. Yin recommends upholding a clear chain of evidence and organizing the database through the research procedure. In line with this, I used a semi structured interview schedule. This combination of

interpretive depth and procedural rigor strengthened the credibility, transparency, and contextual understanding of lived experiences of concerned women in local development process.

### **Selection of the Study Area**

I have chosen one of the Rural Municipalities, Lalitpur Nepal. Purposefully. The municipality selected the is rich ethnic diversity, which is crucial for this research. As a local level government, the rural municipality has demographic and geographical landscape that is rich for my study purpose.

I have widespread knowledge of about the Rural Municipality, having worked in the area for ten years assigning at different wards, existing village development committees (VDCs) years. Since 1987 to 1997, I had worked based at the community under the Community Development Program (CDHP) of the United Mission to Nepal, where I was actively engaged in community health and development activities. From 1997 to 2015, I served as a Social Development Officer at the Lalitpur District Development Committee (DDC). During this period, I remained closely involved with the communities of the Rural Municipality. During the time my primary job responsibilities included women's health and empowerment in the early years, and later, as the focal officer for gender and women's issues in development activities at the DDC. This professional background has provided me with deep contextual knowledge, practical experience, and strong local connections, making it highly supportive for conducting fieldwork in my study area.

### **Selection of Research Participants**

As mentioned earlier, I had long standing familiarity with several women who had been actively engaged in local development through women's groups, cooperatives, teaching professions, development activism, and political leadership within my professional working areas of nearly three decades. This prior connection facilitated my access to appropriate participants for the study. In consultation with my supervisors and key informants, I received encouraging suggestions and decided to select participants purposively, in alignment with the study objectives.

A total of twelve participants were selected from diverse sectors, including elected women members, staff members associated in the development process, development facilitators who work in the field, members of development project implementation bodies (such as consumers/users' committees), and local development activists, householders who had directly participated in associated in development

activities. Regarding the covering or representation for the municipal area, I have at least one participant from each ward; while preparing the framework for participant selection, I consulted the Chairperson and the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Rural Municipality and received their verbal consent to proceed.

Subsequently, I contacted a focal woman who assisted me in reaching the identified participants. I met all the participants in person to continue discussions and supplement the data as needed.

### **Background Participants of the Study**

I have focused interview or data collection during those five years matching the first periodic election federal republic Nepal. Because electoral leadership is the driving mechanism of the development process. I have selected my participants purposively local women who are development users'/beneficiaries, and teachers/education activists. I believe that all my participants were rich with experienced-based information for this research. All participants are rich in their experience regarding development and governance. About the elected members, they were elected in the election of 2017 and completed five years' experience completely. Regarding the name of the participants presented here are pseudo names for their privacy protection. I have kept their original details very securely.

Asha is a 40-year-old woman from the Brahman community. She is married and has two children. She is working as an employee in the office local Rural Municipality. She has been working for almost seven years, focusing on women's issues, empowerment, and participation in development. Her role involves facilitating women's engagement in enforcing public policy, and she has been closely observing how women participate in local governance, particularly within policy driven processes.

Anju, a 45-year-old Brahman woman, has completed her high school education. She belongs the local community in the study area and is enthusiastic about contributing to local development programs. She has practical experience as a treasurer, User's Committee (development implementation committees) which reflects her active engagement in local governance structures.

Bina is a 35-year-old Brahman woman, married with two children. She has had experience in local development and women's empowerment. With significant experience working through user committees and as a development facilitator for a

non-governmental organization, she has contributed to grassroots development. She has been working as an employee in the local government for about ten years.

Batuli, a 47-year-old Chhetri woman, with five children, three sons and two daughters. Married at the age of 17, she gave birth to her first daughter at 18, who is now 29 years old, while her youngest daughter is 18. Batuli was unable to continue her education beyond primary school. Despite this, she has gained valuable experience in the local development process. Recently, she led a project providing knitting and sewing training for a local women's group, a course of three months. She has also served as an executive member of various local development User Committees (UCs).

Junu is a 32-year-old Chhetri woman. She is married and has one child. She has completed her education certificate and has over ten years of experience working as a development facilitator, particularly in women's empowerment and local development initiatives. At present, she is employed in the local government.

Lila is a 35-year-old married Brahman woman with two children. She has completed a high school diploma and has worked as a development facilitator for more than two decades. Throughout her professional career, she has been actively engaged in women's development and empowerment. Based on her observations, women's participation in development remains unsatisfactory, even though policies are becoming increasingly progressive in promoting women's involvement in local governance.

Parbati, a woman over 50 years old, belongs to Tamang community. I first met her during her high school years, and I have known her family for a long time. She has been a schoolteacher in her community for more than 25 years. Over this time, she has closely observed the progress of women's development and empowerment. She finds that both society and government attitudes have become more positive compared to the past. When she began her schooling, however, both she and her family faced significant criticism for sending a girl to school.

Rita, a 30-year-old Brahman woman, is married and has two children. She was elected as a local level representative in the 2017 election the first under the Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal's 2015 Constitution and the restructuring of the state. She was nominated as an executive member of the municipality. Although she was enthusiastic about contributing meaningfully to local governance, her experience did not fully meet her expectations.

Rojita is 40 yrs old woman. She is educated to higher secondary level. She is married and has a Child. She was elected in the election as an executive member of Bagmati Rural Municipality. She tried to do lot of things during her five years tenure, but she could not do as expected and even policy intended. She has bad experiences of domination of traditional patriarchic social structure.

Rima is a 30-year-old Magar woman. She is married and has two children. She has completed high school education and has been actively involved in user committees, particularly in cooperative building projects. She also served as treasurer of a users' committee for a women's cooperative building project.

Shanti, 35 years old married Tamang woman, is a political activist. She has a child and is basically educated. She has experience working with district level committees representing marginalized communities and has also been active in user committees.

Sashi, a 50-year-old Brahman woman, is married with two children. She has been involved in various development committees and cooperative activities. However, over time, she became discouraged, feeling that women's voices were not genuinely heard, and their involvement was limited to fulfilling policy requirements. As a result, she has now withdrawn from active participation and spends her time as a housewife.

### **Data Generation**

One of the key strengths of interpretive inquiry is its flexibility in employing multiple methods to explore a phenomenon (Merriam, 2009). Chadderton and Torrance (2012) highlight that a balanced use of interviews, documentary analysis, and observation is commonly applied in qualitative research. For this study, their suggested approach to triangulation is particularly useful. Among these methods, I chose in-depth interviews as the primary tool for data generation, as they best align with the objective of gaining deep understanding into human subjectivism and lived experience (van Manen, 1997).

### **In-depth Interview**

Undertaking the interpretive approach of my research, the in-depth interviews provided an important means of accessing participants' perspectives based on their live experience. According to Stake (1995) the qualitative researchers take pride in discovering and portraying the multiple views of the case. The interview is the main road to multiple realities. I believe there are multiple realities exist in social contexts.

To guide the process, I used a semi structured interview guide that was sufficiently flexible to allow the inclusion of new ideas that emerged during the conversations. Whereas the guide helped as a convenient starting point, the interviews largely evolved around the participants' own explanations, supported by probing questions to clarify and reaching in depth. I understand that the interview guide is a vital tool for qualitative research, but it must be applied with flexibility to capture participants' trustworthy expressions. In my data collection process, some participants expressed their views in a clear and organized manner at a time, others expressed their thoughts with some hesitation and uncomfortable hesitation. To get the required data, I attempted another conversation managing their next time again. Despite these differences in style, there were both notable similarities and variations in their perspectives, irrespective of their professional or social backgrounds. In the following section, I briefly discuss these different styles of presentation. Data collection guidelines have been given in the Annex section.

### **Data Management**

This section explains the three main activities of data management: recording, transcription, and analysis. I follow accordingly:

#### **Recording**

All the information via the interviews was recorded with the prior consent of my participants individually as I mentioned. When I returned to the field for additional follow up, I verified and recorded with their permission. My field work was very joyful and easy because I was more familiar in that community. I had worked for that entire study area for long time. Therefore, I did not encounter any difficulties during the recording process. In addition to the audio recordings, I also kept brief field notes to capture my immediate observations, nonverbal expressions, and relevant contextual details what I observed during the interview.

#### **Transcription**

I have taken transcription as a foundational step in this study, as it transformed the spoken narratives into written data fitting for systematic analysis as (Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999). I used a verbatim transcription method because of my commitment to maintain a high level of accuracy and preserve the authentic voices of the participants. This required transcribing every word, pause, and utterance as spoken, including hesitations, repetitions, and non-lexical sounds such as *aahum* and *aah.*, *Ke bhane*. This level of fact helped me persist in the closely connected live experiences of the

participants and ensured that no meaningful nuance was lost during the transition from audio to text.

I believed this careful approach necessary for my interpretive inquiry, as it enabled me to remain as confined to the raw data as possible and minimize probable interpretive biasness. By maintaining the integrity of participants' spoken words, I was able to capture not only what was said but also how the emotional tone, pauses, and rhythm of the conversations (Oliver et al., 2005). Even though this procedure was time consuming, I understand it valuable in delivering a rich and comprehensive textual record that served as a strong foundation for conducting a rigorous thematic analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

In qualitative research, data analysis is not a different phase but a relatively ongoing procedure that begins throughout fieldwork for research. As Spencer et al. (2003) note, it is an inherent and ongoing part of qualitative research. Furthermore, following Wolfe (2009), I performed the preliminary work of analysis early, engaging in reflection and preliminary interpretation even prior to the transcription process has done.

I employed manual thematic analysis of data to confirm a profound engagement with the raw data. I followed to utilize highlighting approach to identify and extract essential statements that revealed phenomenon under study as van Manen (1997). Then those statements were translated into preliminary codes and subsequently organized into the thematic template. To prepare a dynamic theoretical basis, I interpreted these themes by presenting the special positions of Participatory Development Theory, and Gender and Development Theory. I employed the Participatory Development Theory to cross-examine the procedure and quality of women's participation (RQ1), while Gender and Development Theory delivered the structural lens required to discover the socio-cultural barriers and power relations (RQ2) that describe their understandings. Embedding these theories originally guaranteed that my research delivered both the practical aspects of participation and the systemic limitations of the gendered setting. In subsequent cycles of examination, these codes were synthesized into thematic table through my application. This iterative series of coding and theme permitted a strong assessment crossways cases whereas residual searching to outliers (Braun & Clarke, 2021). By choosing for manual examination, I kept a reflexive proximity to the data, permitting a

supplementary interpretive and contextualized understanding of how my participants get experience to their participative role in local development process.

### **Meaning Making**

My process of making meaning from the data was iterative and reflective as well. I began my analysis instantly after data collection by highlighting relevant words, sentences, and sections (Austin & Sutton, 2015). Further, I remembered some significant symbolic responses like gestures, facial expressions during the interview with the participants, and I verified it with other conversations, and my own experience making reliable meaning. In this primary stage it was challenging, as I quickly realized that understanding the data required a deeper engagement. I went through repeatedly returned to the audio recordings, compared them with my field notes, and read the transcribed texts. The constant cross checking ensured the quality and accuracy of the meaning.

A focal aspect of my interpretive inquiry was reflecting on, elaborating on, and discussing the women's experience of participation and ideas, connecting these with my own observations. While I believed the data reached adequate for the research, then I started a systematic process of thematic analysis. Following the steps suggested by Braun and Clarke (2021), I focused on identifying, analyzing, and reporting arrangements within the data. I transcribed the information from the interviews, which were recorded in my device. My own observation and conversation notes, which were first recorded in brief form, were later expanded and elaborated in detail for the process of meaning making. Following the data analysis process suggested by Creswell (2009), I systematically organized my findings through a sequence of collecting, transcribing, coding, and interpreting the data. I frequently contacted my participants to verify my field and observational notes, interview narrations, and tips. It supported me to relate associations in the data and develop primary categories. Through the categorization, I generated themes. Then after I studied through additional field visits to ensure a deeper and more accurate understanding. I incorporated my theoretical insights with the appearing themes to interpret to make meaning from the data narration. Through this process, I developed themes for each of my research questions.

### **Qualifiers for Delineating Emerging Agency**

In this study, emerging agency is delineated not as a sudden or external quick fix, but as the gradual manifestation of the inherent value and latent capacity that

women already possess. This emergence is qualified by three distinct markers: a cognitive shift in self-perception from passive recipients to active development actors, the transition from symbolic silence to strategic articulation in public decision-making forums, and the growing relational ability to negotiate or challenge informal patriarchal gatekeeping. By defining agency through these qualitative markers of awareness, articulation, and negotiation, the research interprets the transformative process of women reclaiming their pre-existing internal strengths to influence local governance, rather than viewing empowerment as a static or bestowed outcome.

### **Quality Standards**

The qualitative research involves rigorous study ethically ensuring validity and reliability. Many scholars argue that qualitative research is based on different assumptions concerning reality and a different worldview. It should consider validity and reliability from a perspective consistent with the philosophical assumptions underlying paradigm. Merriam (2009) suggests discussing trustworthiness and objectivity in qualitative research concerning terminologies of validity and reliability. Qualitative research also has strategies to establish authenticity and trustworthiness of a study. Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) declare validation of findings occurs throughout the steps in the process of research. This discussion focuses on it to enable a researcher to indicate its necessity to convey the steps taken in the studies ensuring the accuracy and credibility of the research findings. Validity does not carry the same implications in qualitative research as quantitative one. The qualitative research approach has its quality standards, unlike the quantitative approach to research which focuses on validity and reliability.

In this study, validation has been maintained through rapport building, data collection and member checking as a continuous effort throughout my inquiry apart from just a final check (Creswell, 2011). Similarly, acknowledging my role in co-constructing knowledge based on a long development experience and controlling biasness through reflexivity (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

This study has followed the four criteria of trustworthiness, namely Credibility, Transferability, Dependability and Confirmability (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). In this context credibility has been ensured through establishing the truth value of findings through prolonged engagement in the field. I have ensured transferability by providing enough detail so findings can be applied to other similar rural settings. Likewise, dependability is achieved by following logical research process and

maintaining reflective diary. Similarly, confirmability has been ensured that the findings are clearly derived from the data.

Some factors contribute to the quality and worth of qualitative research. For example, Tracy (2013) stressed selecting a worthy topic that has long been overlooked, misunderstood and the study or investigation of the issue also bears the potential to promote transformation. Further, utilizing enough time and effort in the field, using an appropriate interview procedure, and other tools efficiently establish rigor. As said by Tracy, different aspects like the worthy topic, rigor, credibility, ethical research practice, and sincerity contribute to ensuring quality in research.

### **My Positionality as a Researcher**

Acknowledging my positionality as a male researcher, I presented that my objective was not to speak for women. I just provide an academic platform for their voices through Interpretive Inquiry. By asserting high reflexivity and leveraging my professional background in the social development sector. I established a trust-based relationship with my participants. It permitted me for an intense interpreting of hidden barriers and other issues on their participation in the local development, such as patriarchal gatekeeping in their context. Ultimately, this methodology shifts the focus from my gender to the accuracy and agency of the participants' descriptions.

### **Ethical Considerations**

I conducted this research with faithfulness to ethical standards, ensuring the trustworthiness and integrity of the findings. I have followed the ethical framework for this study was informed by established guidelines of McNabb (2008) and Tracy (2013). Major key ethical principles were followed throughout the entire research process, from initial participant engagement to the final finale work.

Prior to data collection, all participants received a comprehensive explanation of my study's purpose, methods, and their role. The pre-informed and clear communication make more convenient to both participants and me researcher.

In this study, I have followed KUSOED's ethical guidelines such as Ethic of no harm, informed consent, anonymity, no dishonesty, non-violation of privacy. Research ethics has been maintained throughout my entire research procedure, following the research protocol (Merriam, 2009). To maintain the privacy of participants, enough ethical procedures were taken to ensure confidentiality. Individual and personal identities were protected, and although participant's narratives

were incorporated into my final report, all identifying details, including names, address and exact places, were anonymized. The challenge of keeping confidentiality in my studies where organizations and individuals may be easily recognizable (White et al., 2003) was carefully managed to prevent any unintentional exposé. This commitment to ethical conduct extended beyond data collection to include reporting, presentation, and subsequent dissemination of the research findings.

In addition, this study supported the standards of academic integrity by referencing all original works cited, thereby avoiding plagiarism. The research was conducted without any form of discrimination, exploitation, or falsification based on caste, gender, ethnicity, or occupation.

### **Essence of the Chapter**

For my research I applied A qualitative, interpretive inquiry to explore women's perception and experience of participation in local development process. Guided by the principle that reality is subjective and socially constructed, I approached the research as a co-creation of meaning between me as a researcher and participants. This non-positivist framework informed all methodological decisions: the purposive sampling of women in the selected Rural Municipality, the conduct of in-depth interviews, and the application of iterative thematic analysis. I chose this approach because aim is to engage ethically and contextually with the participants, making sure that their authentic expressions are appreciated. By doing so, I hope to generate findings that are not only academically rigorous but also practically meaningful in promoting gender equity and fostering more inclusive development practices in rural society.

## CHAPTER IV

### WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES OF PARTICIPATION IN DEVELOPMENT

This chapter presents the analysis and interpretation of data collected from research participants involved in local development processes. The purpose is to explore lived experiences and perceptions of women and their participation within the framework of Nepal's federal governance system and gender inclusive policies in local governance and development process. Using an interpretive approach, the analysis seeks to understand how women perceive, experience, and negotiate their roles in local development planning, decision making, implementation and sharing the fruits of development.

I have seen, and experienced during my professional development, after 1990, issue of inclusive and gender friendly development approaches significantly indorsed in governance and development. *Local Self Governance Act and reugulation, 1990*, mandated to the local bodies (District Development Committees, Municipalities and Village Development committees) for adopting clear policy and at least ten percentage of the development budgets should be allocated for women empowerment. Similarly international and national non-governmental organizations also were active for women's empowerment. After the declaration of federal system of governance in Nepal, policies and legal frameworks have emphasized gender inclusion and the active participation of women in decision making at the local government level and legally mandated required number of women and gender representation practices have successfully increased.

Different significant themes developed from the data. The first, the gap between policy and practice, examines why legal requirements do not always result in meaningful implementation. Another symbolic presence over substantive power shows as illusion of inclusion in regarding women's participation in local development process. The third theme classifies the gaps in development significances, finding how women's skills and income generative programs for economic empowerment are frequently neglected. Finally, the fourth theme, participation without power, emphasizes women's constrained influence on local leadership and decision-making process. This thematic structure delivers the

groundwork for interpretation in what way the participants understand, negotiate, and attempt to encourage local development processes.

The interpretation shows that though policies mandate women's participation in development process, their actual engagement in and decision-making process continues to be controlled by different limitations. Narratives from local women leaders, teachers, and community members indicate that despite their hard work and active engagement, women's voices are frequently marginalized in agenda setting, budgeting, and project implementation as well.

### **Gap Between Policy and Practice in Promoting Women's Meaningful Participation**

Inclusive governance and gender equality are often discussed in principle, but women specific programs remain limited, and initiatives meant to empower women are frequently treated as less priority. This background supports to understand the contests women face in local governance, normally in interpreting formal provisions into real impact as demonstrated in the following narration of an elected woman representative. Rojita expresses her unsatisfying experience as follows:

*See, I was elected in the vital position from the previous election. I completed five years and worked effectively. In the immediate last election, I decided to nominate myself for the position of chairperson of my municipality. I went to my party office, confident in my experience and the support I had, to request the ticket for the position. But my party leaders didn't listen to me. Instead, they suggested I accept the vice chairperson's role again. I claim with reference to the current policy, in local level chairperson and vice chairperson is guaranteed by the policy as gender perspective. I was confident to win the position by election. But When I tried to be the chairperson, they denied that saying promise: Work well as deputy, and you will be nominated for the post in next election. Then I thought I would never get the top leading position. Frustrating from the practice, I decided I would not be involved in any things regarding local development and governance.*

Rojita shares her experience and optimistic and pessimistic ways in the first tenure of five years she had worked effectively hoping she would get the ticket of the first position from her political party. But she could not have succeeded in getting the ticket for the chairperson's position. Rojita was confident that she would elect if she got the ticket for the chairperson. When the political party refused to provide the

ticket for the position of chairperson, she got frustrated with her role participation in local governance and development as well. Her narration clearly demonstrates how gendered political structures limit women's leadership opportunities. Although she desired to be nominated for the position of chairperson and approached her party with confidence, the authorities rejected her request and directed her toward the same position again. This replicates a common shape in local politics where women are comprised in supportive roles but excluded from important leadership positions. Despite fulfilling her accountabilities industriously and hoping her performance would protect a future nomination, she was again overlooked in favor of a male candidate. Her dissatisfaction and infidelity disclose how authorities control women's improvement in decision making places. Her experience illustrates that her party authorities want to keep women in symbolic nature of representation. This narration demonstrates how deeply rooted and women restrict from the power sharing.

Rita is another woman representative from ward level. As an elected woman representative for local government, she shares her experience as gap between policy and practice:

*As an elected Ward Committee member, I have gained firsthand experience of how local government functions. What I have observed regarding women specific programs is quite disappointing. Despite frequent discussions about inclusive governance and gender equality and the existence of policies mandating women's representation, the practical implementation of initiatives supporting women's development remains very limited. In my understanding, only an insignificant number of programs have been conducted targeting to women by the local government even though current policies direct to make special programs for women*

Rita's description indicates a clear gap between current policies and limited implementation in practice at local level. As an elected Ward Committee member, she expresses her disappointment for lack of women targeting programs in her municipality. Although inclusive governance and gender equality are widely discussed but never been implemented. Further, she indicates the women targeting specific program should be launched as mandated current policy provisions. But such legal commitments have not been translated into women's empowerment and capacity enhancement in practice. Her interpretation highlights that very few programs have been initiated in the name of women, indicating that gender focused initiatives are

often treated as less priority as a token effort rather than integral components of local development. Rita's involvement underscores a tenacious gap between policy and real practice.

Likewise, Asha has been observing the gap between policy and practice in ground reality in municipal areas. Despite advanced constitutional mandates pointed at enhancing women's participation in local development such as demanding different genders in chairperson and vice chairperson's roles there remains a clear gap between policy intents and real practice. Practical observations show that while legal frameworks have improved, genuine gender inclusive participation still faces significant challenges on the ground. But she is one of the eyewitnesses ignoring the policy and she shares her experience as:

*My practical observation of local government dynamics, particularly from a gender inclusive perspective, reveals a significant disjuncture between progressive policy intentions and the realities of women's participation. The transition to a federal system and the promulgation of the new constitution have indeed accompanied in a more progressive legal framework, notably mandating women's involvement in governance. This marks a substantial shift from previous eras, where gaining any political space for women was a considerable struggle. A prime illustration of this policy practice gap lies in the legal provision stipulating that the Chief and Deputy Chief positions of local government bodies should be held by individuals of different genders.*

Asha's reflection highlights a critical contradiction in policy provisions and practical field in present the governance of local level. She acknowledges that the positive legal system. But she argues that legal inclusion does not connect to functional equality. She opined in the need to put it into practice. By explaining the provision of the Chief/Deputy Chief provision, she argues with a structural mechanism that was designed to ensure inclusion. She adds it often results in a gendered hierarchy, where women are technically included (usually as Deputies) but practically subordinated. It aligns through the broader theme that while the form of governance has changed, the function remains intensely gendered.

Bina illustrates similar examples indicating the malpractice of the current policy as an example of political alliances of different parties. As a result of that political interest of women must loosen both positions of chief and deputy. Anxiously she expresses her perception reflecting on the 2022 local elections as follows:

*I observed the 2022 local election; I have seen that systematically undermines gender-inclusive intent in our municipality. Despite the legal directive, there male candidates elected to both chairperson and vice-chairperson a result of bad political alliances among different political parties. By such bad practices women candidates are excluded. If you see the result of previous elections the vice president was a woman, but never elected man as a chairperson, that is matters for women's participation in local development process.*

Here, Bina's perception delivers an important message at how political apparatus can systematically avoid gender-inclusive policy mandates. Her reflection of the 2022 elections disclosures a strategic ambiguity in the policy provisions for the political game, while the regulation anticipates guaranteeing gender balance in the top two executive roles. Here Bina discloses that parties prioritize political consolidation over inclusion. Such types of practice are important since it presents the transition from lawful inclusion to power exclusion. Still the policy exists to promote women's participation, the bad practices.

### **Symbolic Presence over Substantive Power: The Illusion of Inclusion in Local Level Governance**

Through the introduction of the *Constitution of Nepal, 2015*, the governance structure has undertaken substantial changes, encouraging inclusive method to local governance and development compared to the past. Under the constitution many policies now emphasize equitable involvement and representation, targeting for women, in decision-making level. Nevertheless, a critical viewpoint suggests that the simple presence of women in development committees or projects does not mechanically translate into meaningful participation. Notwithstanding procedure directives and quantitative targets, women's participation remains tokenistic serving to meet formal requirements relatively than authorizing them to influence decisions or contest existing power relations.

Let me present a participant's perception as an employee. Asha, an employee who has long experience in the field of women's development and empowerment at local level, shared a perception shaped by her extensive professional experience. Her explanation intensely highlights the gap between mandated inclusion and actual influence:

*Through my experience as an employee of the municipality, I have practical reality of women's involvement in planning and executing development*

*projects. When the new constitution was disseminated and local governments were formed, there was a profound excitement among women, tired to the advanced rhetoric of inclusion. Nevertheless, a thoughtful gap exists between these policy intension and real practice, women's involvement often leftovers more symbolic than practical. Let me share a particularly touching instant during a plan formulating meeting: a women representative put her proposal to allocate required budget for leadership development training for women at her ward. Despite her perseverance in supporting the agenda, the Chairperson did not take priority on it, and the board in due course denied approval. Her expression was silenced by the authority. As an employee, I was not allowed to speak on it; my role was just to take notes of what they decide. I felt uneasy, because the agenda was significant for women. But present at the table does not connect to having a voice in the decision-making process.*

Asha's experience as an employee of the municipal office delivers a behind-the-scenes appearance at the institutionalization of tokenism. She apprehensions the transition from the thoughtful excitement of women driven by the constitutional promise of inclusion to the standing reality of local level government, where participation remains symbolic rather than practical.

In fact, that a woman representative could show insistence in offering a budget for leadership training, only to have it ignored by the Chairperson and denied by the board, illustrates a vertical hierarchy that leftovers untouched by gender allocations. In this context, the Chairperson acts as a filter, deciding which voices are prioritized and which are silenced. This proves that while women have been granted presence at the table, they have not been granted the practical power to influence in decision.

Besides, the refusal of leadership development training is logically significant. By disagreeing the budget for this specific agenda, the local authority is not just refusing a project; they are rejecting the capacity-building that would eventually challenge the substantive power men currently grip. This is a tactical move to keep women in a state of unending symbolic presence qualified enough to sit in the room but not trained enough to lead it.

Further Asha adds her observational remarks lack of representation of women in leadership positions and its impact sees on gender sensitive service delivery and she express her perception as follows:

*Based on my knowledge working both at community and in the office of the rural municipality, I have found that women feel more comfortable and confident when accessing services led by women. They can put their needs openly. However, the reality here is quite different, women's representation in key positions is very poor, as policy intended. Lack of female leadership negatively affects in women's participation to benefit fully from available services. Although the mandatory quota of a woman is technically fulfilled in some areas, it is not reflected in meaningful roles or leadership positions as policy intends.*

Here Asha's additional explanation clearly demonstrates a significant assertion regarding the gender friendly local governance system as per women's perspective. It illustrates the mechanical fulfillment of legally protected quotas often serves as an impression for constant inequality. While she establishes that substantive female leadership is functionally necessary to ensure women feel comfortable and confident enough to access services, the realism is defined by a shortage of women in key positions. Such types of detaches highlights that the rural municipality is seen the symbolic presence of women to satisfy provisional compliance, by this means creating an illusion of inclusion that fails to grant them the substantive power required to influence policy or foster genuine women participation in development.

In this context, I found quite critical observation from another participant, Lila. With wide experience of working with local women, as a development facilitator, Lila shares her deep understandings as following:

*For more than twenty years, I have been working as a social mobilizer, spending largely of my time with community women. Over these years, I have seen more women attending meetings and being listed as participants. On paper, it looks like women's participation has increased. But this participation often does not carry much meaning. Many times, I feel it is just to fulfill a rule or to show that women are included, rather than to give them a real role in decision making. It seems alike they are invited, but not given the significant role, authority to contribute fully.*

Here, Lila's narration delivers a longitudinal viewpoint on the Illusion of Inclusion, close-fitting how periods of increased presence have failed to create a shift in good practice. She differentiates between participation as a measured and participation as power, noting that whereas women are increasingly listed as

participants to fulfill legal provisions, their attendance remains just for a formality. As per her observing that women are invited but not provided the significant part. Lila discloses a systemic gatekeeping where the physical presence of women is used to authenticate a process that still refutes them the self-sufficiency to contribute meaningfully. Ultimately, her experience as a development facilitator approves that she has understood the art of paper inclusion satisfying the eyes of diversity although sensibly protecting the core of decision-making power from women. Lila presents an example of ward committee structure and raises the subject of leadership and decision-making capability. Let me present example as she shared as follows:

*For example, in the ward committees, there are supposed to be at least two women among five members, and one of them must be from the Dalit community. That is political provision, so the number is fulfilled for legal compliance. But in all these elections, I have never seen a woman chairperson, not in any ward or even at the municipality level. I have seen even in the meetings, women rarely raise their voices, in development issues. If they did not get support to their agenda, they were predominantly neglected by authorities. By the example of the committees, which are meant to be strong and inclusive, women's agendas still take very underprivileged attention even though current policy provisions are good for women's participation in development process.*

Lila's specific instance of ward committees delivers a clear picture of how symbolic attendance is institutionalized substantive power is limited. Through highlighting that the legal provision of the five-member committee is strictly met, she identifies the primary source of the Illusion: the municipality successfully fills its committees to meet legal provision yet confirms the leadership hierarchy remains closed for women. As a result, that a woman has never held a chairperson position at the ward or entire the municipal level. It proves that confines women to the role of quiet observers rather than influenced decision-makers.

Besides, Lila discloses the brittleness of this inclusion by describing how even when women attempt to use their agency, their voices are ignored by the recognized authorities. This release confirms that women's agendas receive only disadvantaged attention, effectively neutralizing their existence. Eventually, this example demonstrates that the inclusion of women in those committees or boards is a performative act of governance; that contents the statement of the law whereas

maintaining a power structure that remains practically exclusionary. Ultimately, her narrative underscores the persistent disjuncture between representation and real decision-making power, a key barrier to achieving transformative gender equality in local governance.

In this regard, let me present another participant Bina's experience, who wanted to participate with decision making positions, but she did not get the chance to be achieved.

Bina, a woman who clearly possessed the qualifications and drive to lead, faced a disappointing reality when the drinking water project for her community was approved. She was committedly interested in leading the team of User's committee (*Upabhokta Samiti*) being a chairperson but again had to accept the treasurer's role. She shares her experience as follows:

*I remember when a drinking water project was approved for my community; it was really needed for my community. Even I was capable of being the chairperson of that committee, and I put my interest at the consumer's meeting (Upabhokta Bhela). I had tried so hard to get this agenda passed in the planning phase, and I had a true commitment for the water supply. But, in the end, I didn't get the position. I had to accept the treasurer's post instead. I thought, 'Okay, I'll still do my best, because this water supply project is a big deal in our community, it really needs it.' So, I got involved. Once I noticed that the used materials and quality of construction were not good. I raised concern against it. I wanted to make it with good quality standard. I was worried about proper utilization of the budget. Unfortunately, I could not get support to my concern. It felt like my voice just didn't carry weight. I understood the hidden interest behind cause of denied my proposal for the chairperson. The project was done, but I couldn't be satisfied though.*

Bina's experience exemplifies how local governance often usages women to fill seats exclusive of giving them any actual encouragement. By being refuted the leadership role of Chairperson and pressed into the position of Treasurer, the participant was given a title that seemed good on documents but carried no actual authority practically. When she strained to ensure the project was supposed to be done honestly enquiring poor quality of construction and budget spending, she was ignored by those in power. This shows that the inclusion was just an illusion; she was permitted to be part of the committee to meet a requirement, but the arrangement was

designed to keep the hidden interests and prevent her from making any meaningful changes.

Let me present another participant Junu who has been observing in gender perspective in leadership position Junu expresses her observation with working experience as an employee and development facilitator as follows:

*I have watched closely how political leaders do power exercise. Men are reluctant to give up key leadership power to women. At both the municipality and ward levels, I have never seen a woman selected and elected for the position of Chairperson. Even in other forums like in User's Committees, women did not get selecting as a chairperson. If women got any significant position, their roles are often subordinative. They expected to show up, sign on to the documents, or represent the municipality at public events to meet mandated requirements. In the important meeting like budgeting, planning or other economic development concerns decided by men any other ways. I have observed that in meetings where a woman's voice is kept aside by the authorities. True gender equality in leadership is still far away, because women are in systematically sidelined by male-dominated societal structures that refuse to value women's potentiality.*

Based on Junu's close observations, she perceives women's participation in local development as a performative illusion. Her understandings is a system where women are given labels and visible tasks just to show progress but are deprived of from real power exercise. Based on her description women experience a form of staged involvement where they are granted to visible, non-consequential tasks like signing aiming to meet the mandated provisions.

### **Gendered Gaps in Development Priorities: Negligence on Women's Skills and Economic Empowerment**

It is valuable to understand the status of gender priorities are conducted in local development planning and budgeting. Likewise, it is also important to perceive whether women representatives can effectively influence development planning and decisions. Even though legal provisions ensure women's inclusion in decision making levels. Women's capacity to advocate for women centered programs based on their actual needs often depends on institutional support and budget allocation.

Let me present here Rojita's narration based on her live experience. Rojita, an elected representative in a reserved quota for women. She presents how limited

planning and budgeting limit women's ability regarding skill based economic empowerment as follows:

*When I was elected, I felt a deep sense of pride. I believed that the reserved seat for women was a great policy achievement and a real opportunity for us to make well local development specially for women's issues. However, my experience soon turned into disappointment. I want to share one of my bitter experiences regarding the failure of women's agenda. Women's groups in my community had requested skill-based training programs. I proposed approving these projects with sufficient budget allocation. The board initially accepted my proposal in principle, which gave me hope. But later, I came to know that no substantial budget had been allocated for those projects. Only a small amount was set apart for a few limited training courses.*

Rojita's account reflects the persistent disconnection between gender inclusive policy frameworks and the actual priorities of local governance. Whereas the reservation policy has shaped formal places for women's representation, her experience disclosures how these spaces often fail to interpret into concrete support for women's economic empowerment. Despite her dynamic initiative to advocate for skill-based training agendas identified by local women as significant for livelihood development the lack of adequate budget allocation proves how women's priorities are systematically sidelined. Her explanation exposes the systemic abandonment of women's economic empowerment in local development, where skill-based activities are often marginalized during the planning and budgeting stage. While her proposal was accepted in principle, the consequent lack of monetary commitment imitates a deep-seated procedure of traditional structure over women participation. This gap between policy endorsement and financial allocation demonstrates that women's leadership is often restricted to tokenism. Ultimately, the systematic underfunding of gender-specific programs confirms that women remain participants in name only, lacking the factual resources necessary to drive meaningful socio-economic change in as per women's need in the communities. Further Rojita's continued the issue of, she shares as:

*I strongly raised my voice, demanding fair budgeting, but the authorities ignored my concern. At that moment, I realized that my presence in the meeting was not truly meaningful. The discussions often moved very quickly, full of technical terms, figures, and procedures that I could not fully follow*

*mainly because I was unaware of the hidden interests of some of the officials. I was really upset when I knew decisions had already been made by a small core group before the meeting and here just presented as formality. It felt as though the meeting was just a formality, and my participation did not really matter. I raised my hand several times and eventually got a chance to speak. I again presented the agenda for skill-based training for women, but the chairperson simply replied, we will think about it next year's plan. At that moment, I understood that my name in the attendance register was enough to meet the policy requirement. I was there physically, but my voice carried no weight. I felt deeply disappointed perceiving powerlessness.*

In addition, Rojita's experience disclosures how official formalism serves as a fence to practical gender equality at a local level. Showing technical language and the prevalence of pre-decided programs by a core group of officials effectively neutralizes the influence of members. The repetitive release of her economic empowering proposals under the appearance of future planning exposes a general negligence that treats women's economic empowerment developmental priority.

Asha finds a significant gap between policy intents and women's requirements. She transcripts that programs in the name marginalized women focused often prioritize construction rather than substantive benefits as follows:

*I have observed that many programs supposedly targeted at women are not truly focused on women's capacity building. I don't have any seen skill based and economic empowerment-oriented program. For example, in a village there is built a women cooperative building in the name of women. The building was constructed by a contractor, I did not see there is women role rather than formality. The budget was in the name of women's capacity building. I do not believe that building will help for marginalized women. I think there is hidden interest of someone for commission. Still, it is seen that physical infrastructure is in development rather than women's capacity development or economic empowerment.*

Asha's interpretation based her own observation on a gap between policy intents and real women's need. She observes that although many programs are officially said as women-focused, they hardly address women's skill development or economic empowerment in a meaningful way. As an alternative, development efforts tend to prioritize physical structure, such as the construction of buildings, and over

investments in women's income-generating skills. The example of a women's cooperative building exemplifies how women's involvement is often met with formality rather than participation. Despite the budget being allocated on the name of women's capability enhancements, the targeted women were neither actively participated in the procedure nor placed as beneficiaries of the intervention. Asha articulates disbelief about the practicality of such infrastructure for marginalized women and increases concerns about hidden interests and possible misuse of budget. This description reflects a gendered gap in development significances, where symbolic projects substitute functional efforts limiting the transformative possible of development activities.

In the context, Lila clarifies the challenges faced by women in interpreting skill-based training for economic empowerment. She presents her understanding as follows:

*I have experienced that there are numerus small-scale skill trainings in the name of income generation and women empowerment. Regarding women targeted programs, trainings like soap making, and bamboo stool making are organized in our community. But I found that the majority of the training courses are small scale, not get enough time and required training material because of insufficient budget for that. I believe that training itself is meaningless if it is not connected to the marketing of the products. Therefore the product should be marketable. After the training, the Municipality should take responsibility for helping market the products. But I did not see any skill-based training succeeded because of the gap of market demand municipal priorities.*

Based on Lila's expressions, there is seen a gendered gap in development priorities, where women's skill-based training courses very superficial and inadequate for income generation. Even though small-scale training such as crafting, swing-knitting, and bamboo stool production remain limited just as shake for training. Without detailed planning, particularly the lack of market linkage, follow-up support, and institutional responsibility challenges women's capability to translate acquired skills for economic empowerment. Consequently, women's economic empowerment is treated as a secluded activity rather than skill and economic empowerment.

Similarly, another participant, Rima articulates her perception as gap between planning and real needs of women in skill and income as follows:

*I have learnt that income-generating skill programs are important for me and other rural women. For instance, I recently participated in training that was organized by a non-governmental organization. It was about livestock management. The livestock training provided us with practical techniques for cattle and goat raising. This program is related to productivity and increased earnings. These examples proved that when development priorities connect to practical need, we can achieve true economic benefit. Unfortunately, such types of skill-based programs remain the exception in current development priorities.*

Rima's learning and experience there is seen a critical misalignment between usual development agendas and the practical needs of rural women. Whereas old-style development often selects infrastructure construction, this interpretation highlights that human capital investment exactly through market-aligned technical skills, which profits the straightest effect on economic empowerment. The achievement of the livestock management training proves that when development is based on real needs and focused on productivity, that successfully links the gap between theoretical empowerment and actual economic empowerment. Additionally, Rima indicates a systemic failure in the wider development scenery by observing that such types of impact remain an exception. I can understand that current priorities often neglect the micro-level economic truths of women in favor of more observable, yet less effective, interventions. This explanation aids as evidence that genuine economic benefit is achieved only when development actors' swivel from symbolic support toward practical capability enhancement of marginalized women in society.

Similarly, another participant, Shanti expressed her perception of women's skills based on economic empowerment as follows:

*I heard that there is a mandatory provision to allocate part of the budget for women's empowerment and development. I believe women should be empowered through economic capacity building. As a rural woman, we need more practical skill development programs that help us earn from local products based on market demand. Nowadays, rural and organic goods such as bamboo baskets, home decorations, vegetables, dairy, and poultry products are gaining good markets. Yet our local leaders primarily focus on road construction and buildings. Even under the new governing system, similar training programs are conducted in the name of women's capacity*

*development, but they have not brought much change. I have not seen significant improvement in rural women's lives, and it seems that women's issues no longer receive the attention they deserve from the government.*

Shanti's experience emphasizes the importance of practical, skill focused programs for women's economic empowerment. She claims that while mandatory budgets are allocated to endorse gender equality, development efforts often converted performative. Funds are finished, but they are not central to actual productive. The motivation remains on fulfilling procedural provisions rather than delivering related, market-oriented training. Outcomes of such programs cannot improve women's status effectively. Generally, women Rural continue to face financial inactivity, where enabling exists in policy documents but practice.

In this context let me present a narration of next participant Anju. She is a local young enthusiastic woman for local development. She wants to do social work and empower the community women. She has been working on women's issues for a long time. She finds neglect of women's voices in planning: when livelihood ideas are pushed aside for roads and shares her experience of attending a planning meeting at her settlement as follows:

*Last year, I attended a gathering organized by the ward committee for planning. I had gone there to propose an agenda for a skill development training program for women in our ward. I specifically wanted to introduce training in making plum pickles, as hog plums (Lapsi) are abundantly available in our community, and their demand in the market is growing. I submitted my proposal. But my proposal was not included in the final plan because maximum participants were interested in road construction to their homes. Basically, men participants were more active dominantly at the meeting, women were attended there but maximum of the women were silent I could not get enough support.*

Anju's experience gives a deep insight into the local situation of development. Rejection of the hog plum pickle-making proposal proves a thoughtful marginalization of women's economic agency within local development planning. Despite the plenty of local raw materials and high market demand, decision-makers prioritized physical infrastructure over sustainable livelihood small enterprises. This significance evidently displays a systemic undervaluation of women's economic possibility, where infrastructural development like road making is preferred over

easy-going skills development and even small entrepreneurship. Additionally, the dominance of male voices at the community committee meeting bent an environment where women's specific needs were discounted. Subsequently, the lack of support for such genuine proposals reproduces a wider negligence toward gender-inclusive economic empowerment and excluding women from meaningful participation in the local economic development.

### **Participation without Power: Women's Constrained Influence in Local Leadership**

Rita is one of the elected women representatives. She finds no women in decisive position entire the local governments of Lalitpur. She understands as:

*I worked five years as an elected women member of municipal executive. I have experienced a discouraging tendency for women's participation in development activities at local level. My participation was visible, but effective. While the law has increased the number of women in local government through reserved seats, our roles could not be increased as I expected. I find the clear gap between the intention of the policy and the practical reality of my context. Current policy provisions mandated gender diversity in major position, but political parties steadily nominate men for the powerful position like chairperson or mayor, excluding women into secondary positions as deputy. This is not fair to my personal feelings, but it is an observable truth. You can see across all wards in our municipality, there is not any one woman. Not only in this municipality, but you can also see other municipalities have same situation. Regarding my role in the meetings, presented in the three to meet formality, I never experienced as significant in decision. I felt disqualified by the core municipal structures where the very important decisions were made. Therefore, I understood true leadership remains out of reach as long as substantive power stays exclusively in the hands of our male colleagues.*

Rita's description highlights the detachment between symbolic and practical participation in local development. While lawful quotas have increased the number of women in attendance, their inspiration still largely symbolic. Such types of behaviors confine women to subordinate positions where they serve to meet formal requirements rather than real participation. Within the municipal executive committees, women are often excluded from core decision-making rings.

Subsequently, their participation becomes a matter of physical presence rather than decision making power. This structural exclusion ensures that despite their elected status, women remain marginalized from the actual exercise of authority.

With similar experiences another participant Rojita expresses her experience of five years serving as an elected woman representative in one of the local governments as with clear, and often frustrating, perspective: women are consistently directed into positions of less power, rarely reaching the top leadership roles. Rojita shares her experience as follows:

*I have experienced that while the number of women participating in local development has certainly grown, this increase is largely due to legal requirements. It's not translating into genuine shared power. The law, for example, clearly states that the Chairperson and Vice Chairperson positions should be held by individuals of different genders. But majority of the political leaders nominate men for the Chairperson. I have had real experience with holding the position. But look beyond my specific situation and you'll see a systemic issue. In our municipality, across all seven wards, every single Ward Chairperson is a man. Women seem attended, but almost exclusively in the status that legally reserved for them.*

Rojita's experience discloses that legal quotas provide participation deprived of power. While the legal provision assures seats for women, political parties act as gatekeepers by keeping top leadership roles, like Mayor or Chairperson, for men. This systemic bias forces women into subordinate roles, making their presence sense alike a procedural formality rather than a leadership chance. This produces a gap between presence an elected member and being an influential decision-maker. Ultimately, the explanation demonstrates that granting the law has opened the door for women's participation, but the real practice of power remains a male-controlled yet. As per her claim, I took the information of all seven Ward Chairperson positions are occupied by men, while women occupy roles that are either mandated by law or lack real decision-making power. Just a member of ward committees.

Parbati expresses her close reviewing finding regarding the performance women with an example of the User/Consumer Committees from the eye of the female local teacher with the narration:

*Being a local woman teacher lived and worked here for a long time; I have closely observed local development activities, projects, and procedures. Over*

*the years, I have seen many initiatives carried out by government bodies and other organizations. Nowadays, I have noticed that many women are showing interest in the field of development. According to the present system, development activities are implemented through locally formed committees known as Upabhokta Samiti. Women involvement is mandated there. I have seen that, women led committees are seen better. They tend to perform well in terms of quality and cost management. Women are generally more attentive to transparency, accountability, and resource efficiency, and they rarely compromise on quality or cost effectiveness. I have several examples that clearly show this. In our municipality, women work very hard and often take on challenging roles. Nevertheless, despite their genuineness and commitment to development, they are hardly given leadership positions and are often involved only to fulfill policy provisions.*

Parbati's description highlights both rising attention of women in local development and the persistent barriers they face in leadership roles. As local teacher, she has observed development processes and implementation practices closely. Her experience illustrates that whereas women's participation in development committees (*Upabhokta Samiti*) is now mandatory, their participation is often partial to fulfilling policy requirements rather than real empowerment. Parbati values that women led committees tend to be more transparent, accountable, and efficient with utilization of resources. She believes that women are more attentive to quality and cost effectiveness in project implementation. This indicates that when women are given active roles, they can significantly improve the performance and integrity of development work. However, she also points out the contradiction that women's hard work and sincerity are often overlooked, as they are rarely provided with real leadership opportunities. Parbati's interpretation reflects the gap between policy and practice in women inclusion. Even though local governance system encourages women's participation, their roles persist largely symbolically. Her description advocates that women keep both the capability and commitment to lead development activities successfully, yet organizational and attitudinal barriers limit their meaningful participation.

Asha is one of the women employees of local government of my study area. She has very bitter experience about the planned project which was diverted. There was a women's capacity building project approved by the assembly in an annual plan

document. The section in charge was preparing to run the program. That was a women's leadership building training project. But when they were almost prepared to conduct the training the in charge came to know the program budget was already switched to make a road. The participant remembers the story indicating a live example of the gap between policy and practice for women's participation as:

*Once, there was a training program included in the planning document for women's capacity building initiative. At that time my team members were getting ready for training, we suddenly found out that the budget was shifted to road making. Later, I came to know the budget had been diverted to a road maintenance project instead. I felt very disheartened when I heard this. I went to speak with the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), but he told me that the decision had been made by the budget review committee. When I approached one of the budget review committee members, he responded, 'Why are you so upset? Women will also use the road.' He continued, 'Look, the road is very important for everyone. The allocated budget was not enough, so we had to adjust. Don't be worried, we will distribute a budget for the training in the next fiscal year.'*

Asha's clarification illustrates a significant gap between gender inclusive planning and gender approachable implementation in local development processes. In local governance, women often perceive formal inclusion without functional decision power, as demonstrated by the subjective rearrangement of funds from gender-specific capacity building to general infrastructural development. This modification proves a systemic de-prioritization of women's empowerment in favor of hardware developments like road maintenance. Male authorities justify as women also need the roads. Eventually, this creates an environment where women's leadership is invited during the planning phase but sidelined during financial execution, underpinning a series of unnatural interventions.

### **Essence of the Chapter**

This chapter examines how women experience and perceive their roles in local development through the local government within our new federal system. Whereas legal frameworks and gender-inclusive policies have significantly increased the numerical presence of women in governance comparing the past governing structure. My study identifies a significant detachment between official representation and real practice at local level. The analysis is prepared into four major themes: the gap

between policy and practice, the transition of women's roles into symbolic presence, the misalignment of development priorities, and the constraints on women's leadership power.

Evidence from the narrative descriptions demonstrate that women are often consigned to sympathetic or subordinate roles, such as deputy, vice-chairperson or treasurer, whereas top decision-making positions continue subjugated by men. Besides, development agendas normally arrange physical infrastructural development over women-centered agendas like skill-based training and income generative programs. Even when women determine high performance in transparency and proper management of the resources, women's voices are often sidelined during the final budgeting and decision-making stages.

It exposes a governance setting where women members have been granted a bench at the board to fulfill the legal quotas however persist excluded from the central implementation of power. The chapter exemplifies that involvement is often presented as a performative act; women's names seem on attending records and in board lists to legalize procedures, but their exact needs such as livelihood training and leadership development are frequently relegated in favor of gender-neutral developments like road making. Ultimately, the chapter argues that present local development practices keep a ladder of power that receives women's attendance but resists their practical leadership in economic development and planning decision-making

## CHAPTER V

### BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION IN THE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

In this chapter, I have explored how the local women understand barriers for women's meaningful participation in development process. In this research there are multiple barriers identified for women's participation in the development process at the local level. Therefore it analyzes through the following five themes: a) traditional gender-based roles and the burden of domestic responsibilities, b) systemic barriers: the gap between policy provisions practice, c) educational and informational exclusion as a fence to women's participation, d) practical constraints and institutional negligence for women's participation, e) intersecting barriers and the continuum of disempowerment how limited formal education becomes a systemic barrier to women to meaningful participation in governance and development process.

Women's meaningful involvement in local development processes remains to be pointedly hindered by wide-ranging and prevalent barriers. These often stem from deeply entrenched socio-cultural structure and patriarchal attitudes that relegate women to domestic roles. Likewise, economic differences demonstrated by limited access to education and economic means brutally limit women's capability in participating in the developmental activities and achieve leadership positions. Official and political inadequacies also play a critical part. Intensifying these contests is the unequal burden domestic chores, which leads to time poverty and leaves women with inadequate time or efforts to take part in development process. Despite current policy provisions and increased representation, in local government with mandatory provisions. These structural and cultural challenges often result in mere tokenism rather than meaningful participation. Let me analyze my data narration with categorized themes as follows:

Current and socio-cultural context of the society's local development, women's meaningful participation is still controlled by the structures. Existing Patriarchal structures continue to describe women mainly as caregivers, placing on them a heavy burden of managing both domestic and public duties. From my observation and experience, many women who wish to engage in local development

must balance multiple roles caring for family, performing household duties, fulfilling social prospects, and attending community meetings often with little support from family members.

Because of unequal division of work, however normalized in society, limits women's potentiality to participate effectively in developmental activities. Despite policies promoting gender inclusion, sincere empowerment remains slow, as many women still struggle with low self-confidence and partial recognition of their leadership capabilities. Real equality requires not only attendance but also a move in social approaches that continues to view women's engagement in development process. Let me present the lived experiences of women involved in local governance, showing how the burden of traditional gender roles continues to restrict to their meaningful participation in development processes.

### **Traditional Gender based Roles and the Burden of Domestic Responsibilities**

Traditional gender based defined roles often gratify as a significant barrier to women's meaningful participation in the development process. Deeply entrenched societal expectations about what constitutes gender behavior, responsibilities, and capabilities frequently consign women to the domestic scope while aligning men as the primary actors for development activities. While categories of work are socially built, they are often apparent as unchallengeable. This insight leads to the undervaluation of women's contributions outdoor the household's province, which can result in their systematic barring from development processes. Limited access to education and skill development opportunities, limit in their ability to resources. Even when women are involved in development activities, their roles are often narrowed to extensions of their traditional domestic chores and care giving responsibilities, rather than empowering in leadership development activities. Challenging and transforming these traditional gender roles seems like hurdles for fostering inclusive development that influences the full potential women.

Although it is saying that local governance reforms have encouraged women's inclusion, they still struggle to participate meaningfully due to household responsibilities. The following explanation from Junu, a municipal employee, reflects these ongoing challenges. Junu shares her experience as follows:

*As a woman employee, I always pay attention to women's issues. I've been closely watching how women get involved in development activities. I noticed that after local governments were set up, rural women became more excited,*

*hoping for new chances. Many rural women come to me with great hope. They often travel long ways from far off areas to reach the municipal office; some women have walk for a whole day just to join in. They do this willingly, which shows they want to be engaged. However, I've also seen that many lead women representatives can't stay all day because they don't have enough time and have home responsibilities. Often, they just sign the attendance or minute book and go home without being able to really speak up. In such circumstances, my curiosity is, how can their participation really matter if this is the situation?*

Jun's description based on her experience reflects a significant strain between the inclusive commitment of local governance and the restrictive realities of rural women's lives. Whereas new policies have flashed high impetus showed by women walking for whole days to attend meetings, their visit is often cut short by the double burden of domestic chores and geographic disadvantages. These structural and socio-cultural fences force women to arrange household duties over public discussion, subsequent in minimal involvement. Because they often have to sign in the attendance register and leave before discussions complete, their attendance remains symbolic rather than practical. Eventually, this proposes that merely opening formal political places is inadequate; exclusive of talking deep-rooted gendered divisions of work and logistical obstacles, women continue limited to the sideline of the development process despite their sincere objectives to contribute.

By Junu's closing question, how can their participation really matter if this is the case? It is one that I found myself resounding through my research. This query, to me, is central to understanding the true quality of women's participation. It advises that although numerical measures of involvement, such as attending in count, strength designates a apparent form of development, they often hide a profounder theme of imperfect real participation. For me, the opinions to a significant gap between the policy intension women's involvement. It is the lived realities of the local level. It is the deeply ingrained societal expectations and practical loads often dominate opportunities for honest influence. This distinction, I believe, necessitates a critical reevaluation of what "meaningful participation" truly signifies for women in local development.

Rita, a local woman member from a remote ward from the municipal headquarter. She has to represent facing struggles to participate in local development.

Contempt her limited education and family responsibilities, she remains intensely committed to contribute to her community's development. Her lived experience highlights how enthusiasm and commitment unaccompanied are often insufficient when socio cultural realities and institutional practices remain uncooperative.

*I am very interested in participating in development for my community, specifically for women's agenda and all activities. When I heard about new local government meetings, I felt so optimistic. I thought, 'Now we can truly speak for ourselves.' It takes me a whole day walking, sometimes starting before sunrise, just to get to the main office for a meeting. My heart feels happy to be there, to listen. But then, when they start talking in big, fast words, and I worry about my children back home who will feed them, who will look after them? It's hard to focus. Sometimes, I cannot understand the whole thing, so I just sit quietly, and I sign the paper and go back home.*

Rita's narration clearly shows a high-pitched contrast between a woman's special motivation and the systemic fences that silence her. While she is highly optimistic about local governance, she faces difficulties that require a full day of walking just to reach the office of the municipality. Once there, her participation is hindered by two main factors. First, the use of complex, hard communication to understand acts as a structural barrier, making the discussion feel exclusive and difficult to follow. At the meantime the socio-cultural burden that of domestic chores and anxiety, making it impossible for her to emphasis on the agenda. These reasons collective force her into a state of submissive participation. She remains physically present to sign the attending paper, but she is practically excluded from the decision-making process. It displays that merely inviting women to meetings is not enough if the setting does not explanation for women's educational backgrounds and domestic realities.

Batuli is an executive committee member from a distant settlement, demonstrates a deep promise to participate in development activities. Though, Batulis's explanation discloses how geographical difficulties and infrastructure deficits interconnect with household responsibility to bound women's effective involvement in local governance. Batuli shares a significant reflection that summarizes her dilemma as follows:

*I was so happy when I was an executive member of a user's committee. I thought, 'Now I can really help build the things our village needs, like drinking*

*water supply water project.' I feel a responsibility to be there, to know what's happening. But my village is so far. Sometimes, when the big rains come, the path is almost impossible to walk. There are no buses or anything from our side. So, even if there's a meeting for the committee, I must think: Can I even reach there? Who will stay with my kids and cattle for the whole day and night if I must walk so far? Sometimes, I try, but I miss important meetings about our projects because of poor transportation. And my house responsibilities. I am interested in doing more for the committee, to check on the work, but I feel trapped here.*

Batuli's description discloses that high levels of inherent motivation and authorized leadership status are often inadequate to guarantee women's active participation in local development. Despite a strong wish to contribute to development projects, women face a double burden of restraints that successfully limits their just attendance in meetings. Structural barriers, such as geographical distances and difficult transportation infrastructure, reduce meeting venues unapproachable, particularly during adverse weather conditions like rainy seasons. These challenges are compounded by socio-cultural obligations related to several unseen domestic chores, specifically child and livestock rearing, which tether women. Subsequently, the connection of poor infrastructure and the lack of family and societal support systems avoid women from using their agency, resulting in their involuntary exclusion from development processes.

As a local teacher Parbati, reflects her observations of women participating in local development initiatives for long time. She explains how socio-cultural pressures and societal arrogances bear to shape and limit women's meaningful participation, even when they achieve formal positions of authority. Parbati shares her observations impeding patriarchal grip for women's participation in development as follows:

*I have been working as local teacher for more than twenty-five years. Therefore, I have observed about women participation in development activities. I always remember a Female Community Health Volunteer (FCHV) from my ward. She must bear varies challenges to manage her time to perform her roles and responsibilities. Later, political parties began approaching her, each wanting to nominate her as their female representative, in line with the legal provision requiring every party to include a woman in local committees. Eventually, she contested the local election and won, becoming an executive*

*member. Despite her success, I still hear many unnecessary and unfair remarks about her. People criticize her simply because she must leave her home frequently for her responsibilities. I know her personally she is a kind, hardworking woman who engages sincerely with the community.*

Parbati's description exemplifies how intensely rooted male-controlled norms and social prospects act as barriers to women's practical participation in development processes. As her observation Parbati presents an example of the woman who rose from a Female Community Health Volunteer to an elected executive member shows that formal inclusion alone does not guarantee empowerment. Despite her democratic achievement and genuine engagement, she faces tenacious social criticism for leaving her home to achieve her accountability.

This narration reflects a broader outline in which women are scrutinized and judged for stepping outside traditional domestic roles, strengthening to woman leadership. Such societal burdens undermine women's self-confidence, limit their ability to exercise given roles, and reduce participation. Parbati's clarification proves that structural and socio-cultural barriers often intersect, making it difficult for proficient women to translate legal provisions into meaningful inspiration in local developmental decision making.

Parbati adds more about the burden of her workload:

*I have personally witnessed elected women who are so dedicated to fulfilling their responsibilities that they often sacrifice their sleep. They stay alert, pay close attention to every detail, and ensure that tasks are completed properly. In my observation, these women consistently show greater results orientation, efficiency, and commitment than many of their male counterparts in similar positions. Their devotion to serving the community is truly admirable. A particular woman now transmits a too much workload managing her entire households, serving as a Female Community Health Volunteer (FCHV), and fulfilling her responsibilities as an executive member of the ward member. I have seen how she is rushed to perform all the tasks. In contrast, while another male ward members are generally free from domestic duties and do not face the same level of pressure.*

Parbati's observation and experience presents how women's dedication to local development is often controlled by the overload of works like household responsibilities, volunteer work, and authorized duties. Despite their apparent

commitment, efficiency, and results orientation, women are forced to direct devastating workloads that male counterparts rarely face. The example of a woman at the same time managing her home, working as a Female Community Health Volunteer (FCHV), and fulfilling her role as a ward member demonstrates how gendered expectations of domestic work intersect with professional responsibilities to limit women's capacity for substantive participation in development. Parbati's explanation underlines that even highly committed women can face marginalization, not due to lack of skill or dedication, but because of tenacious gendered inequities that hamper meaningful participation in local development.

Sashi is one of the active local women from my study site. She shares her lived experiences that reveal how everyday household responsibilities interconnect with social responsibilities, creating considerable fences to women's participation in development processes. Despite being interested in development. She shares her experience as follows:

*You know that our society is male dominated. As a woman, our days start before dawn and often end long after dark, filled with an endless list of domestic chores. I'm talking about waking up lighting the fire for cooking, tending to our animals, then heading out to the family farm, where the sun beats down as we work the fields. After that, it is back to preparing meals, cleaning, filling water, the list just goes on and on. And the hardest part? Daily work is hardly ever helped by our male counterparts. It's simply expected that these are women's tasks.*

Sashi's clarification highlights the determined impact of patriarchal norms on women daily survives and how these socio-cultural expectations limit their participation in development activities. She defines an exhausting monotonous that begins in the early morning and extends late into the night, surrounding cooking, tending to livestock, farming, cleaning house and utensil, and fetching water. This many responsibilities, largely unassisted by male family members, reflect a gendered division of work where domestic and agricultural responsibilities are considered women assigned work.

Additionally, Sashi shares an experience with an example of her experience of how traditional gender roles and practical burdens limits women's engagement in development process as follows:

*Once, while I was participating in a planning meeting at the ward level. I was honestly excited to attend the meeting. I woke up very early that morning, finished all my household chores in a rush, and quickly ate my meal. Despite my efforts, I managed to participate in the meeting. In the meeting, I presented a proposal for shoes making training for my women groups. Unfortunately, my proposal did not accept even though one of the leaders assured us that they would manage the budget for it. I got a lift back home on a neighbor's motorbike and arrived late in the evening. My children were waiting for me to cook dinner. You can imagine how late I finished all my remaining work. It was quite late at night when I finally went to bed, and I hardly got any sleep. This is not just my story many women who want to participate in development activities face a similar workload and pressure every single day.*

Sashi's description adds additional depth to the understanding of how traditional gender roles continue to pressure women's meaningful participation in the development process. Her description intensely describes the double burden that women carry managing household responsibilities alongside desire to engage in development. Her experience represents the persistent gendered unevenness in time, workload, and expectations. In contrast, men members are engaging freely in meetings, and other developmental activities but women must handle multiple jobs, interconnecting responsibilities. Such interconnected multiple responsibilities hamper women for their meaningful participation in development. Sashi's experience reproduces the realism of many rural women: over burden of working pressure and social responsibilities. This lack of support makes genuine empowerment very difficult to achieve meaningful participation.

Now, let me summarize this theme based on the above discussion. Women's meaningful participation in local development is significantly controlled by deeply rooted socio-cultural norms and traditional gender roles. Social prospects continue to define women primarily in terms of household chores, limiting their aptitude to involve fully in development processes. Tenacious stereotypes that question women's competence and technical capabilities their voices, often discouraging active involvement in development process. As a result, even when women occupy formal positions, their contributions are frequently undervalued, and their potential to influence development initiatives is restricted by both cultural norms and social perceptions.

### **Systemic Barriers: The Gap Between Policy Provisions Practice**

Even though New federal governance system has introduced positive legal and legal provisions to promote women's participation, the translation of these commitments into meaningful practice remains deeply problematic. Constitutional guarantees, reservation quotas, and local government acts have increased women's numerical attendance in development fields. However, women perceive their participation is often limiting in formal attendance as counting signatures, and symbolic participation, rather than meaningful participation. It is clearly understood that how administrative procedures, hierarchical governance system, and deep-rooted male authority undermine the essence of women's participation envisioned that policy intent. Women participant experience as encounter an environment where rules and administrative procedures are used to control their participation. These types of practices reflect a policy and practice disconnect, where women's formal inclusion masks their continued marginalization in substantive for development processes.

Within this setting, majority of the participants share how their presence in meetings and development planning spaces felt obligatory rather than empowering as development perspective. The case of Rita illustrates this tension brightly.

Rita as an elected women representative expressed visible frustration about the routine nature of her participation. She explains that, even though she regularly attends ward and municipal meetings, her involvement is driven more by official compulsion than by the opportunity to contribute meaningfully. Her words capture the everyday reality of women who are physically present in governance spaces but remain excluded from real influence. Rita presents her live experience as follows:

*Being an elected women member, I must attend each and every meeting. Many times, I must go to visit project sites frequently. This is the mandatory task of the municipality. But municipality does not provide me with any vehicle for my transportation. Anyhow I must be presented at that given time. By our existing cultural system, a woman has to be more responsible in domestic and reproductive work. Because of the contradictory situation I have to bear big struggle to be participating in local development activities. This is not easy for me to manage my time and effort. I must perform all my household responsibilities like taking care of my children, handling other household chores. It often thinks like carrying three loads at the same time. This constant pressure makes it difficult to stay fully focused or to contribute as actively as I*

*would like during meetings, planning sessions, or monitoring activities. Her, I want to clear that I am not getting the enough support from both sides like municipality does not provide enough transportation and other logistic support. On the other side I would not get enough time to be involved in development activities. Both institutional and social system limit my participation in development process.*

Rita's explanation explores how institutional and social system limit her to participating meaningfully in development processes. She illustrates that the municipal rules mandate to prove women's attendance by signatures in meetings. She must go to visit development project sites at scheduled time, but the municipality does not provide transportation and enough logistic support for her. By the traditional social system, she has to do many tasks in households. Her narration clearly present how women bearing systemic barriers to participate in development activities. Because of the contradictory situation of institutional and social system women are discouraged even though current legal system provision is seen in favor of women in surface.

Another participant, Rima is committed to contribute to development actively to her community; she involves in local development activities while balancing her professional and household duties. Despite her formal inclusion and recognized position, Rima faces systemic and procedural challenges from compound documentation and financial reporting requirements to unreliable support from municipal staff that limit her ability to participate fully. Her experience exemplifies the gap between policy practice hindrances. Rima shares realities as follows.

*It is not easy for me to get involved in development work. Present policy provisions seem satisfactory to women's participation, but numerous operational fences bound my ability to contribute practically. Being a local teacher and social worker, I still face extensive social pressure to participate in development. Recently, I served as the treasurer for our women's cooperative building construction committee. I require to navigate existing processes, compound documentation, and unhelpful staff who often congested the process. These practices highlight the thoughtful detach between the law, which consents women to participate, and the rooted practical reality, which makes the involvement systemically tough.*

Rima's understanding demonstrates the application gap where nice policy provision fails to interpret for engrained institutional resistance. While she occupies a prescribed role as a treasurer of the building construction committee, a position of policy provisions her daily realism is clear by operative fences and complex documentation process. This proposes that the organization delivers women with a stool at the table but concurrently obscures their ability to act through procedural administrative gatekeeping and unhelpful administration. Additionally, the extensive social pressure Rima faces exemplifies workloads. She perceives there is legally encouraged to participate, yet practically very difficult for rural women.

Additionally, Rima adds regarding systemic barrier as follows:

*Elsewhere managing my household chores and teaching responsibilities, I often face contests in navigating the practical realities of my role in local development process. Even with good support from my family, I encounter repeated questions and skepticism from some people and officials regarding the work I do in my site as treasurer. These comments, while socially framed, often translate into procedural delays requests for additional documentation, clarifications, or repeated submissions which make it difficult to complete my responsibilities efficiently. While some staff are cooperative, others are slow to respond or hard to reach, turning what should be routine tasks into multiple frustrating visits.*

Rima's additional description further exemplifies the systemic barriers that limit women's meaningful participation in local development, contempt formal positions and legal inclusion. As per understanding, her accountabilities as treasurer designated other responsibilities are complex by bureaucratic delays, repeated requirements for documentation, and unpredictable behaviors of the municipal employees. Even routine tasks require multiple visits and follow-ups, turning what should be straightforward into a time consuming and frustrating process. In addition, Rima highlights community scrutiny and skepticism, although socially framed, interact with these bureaucratic hurdles.

Shanti, a married woman with a child, has consistently demonstrated her capability and dedication through her active involvement in development initiatives even though she is busy handling her domestic chore and child caring. She wanted to engage with executive power but was not interested in treasure, but she must accept the role. She shares her experiences, as follows:

*I like to involve in development activities actively and visibly. But, still our traditional social institutions and system do not accept women's visible role in development activities. For example, there was a drinking water project approved through the municipality for my community. I wanted to participate being a chairperson. But I did not get a chance, a man selected on that post in internal setting. I was assigned for the position of treasure. I already have worked as treasure in different local development project. I did not want to be a treasure again. But the male leaders insisted, saying, 'Shanti, you are good, the position suits for you.' By one of them reassured me, saying, do not be worried, there is no more work burden for you. We are here to help you. Just you need to go to bank to operate the account, attend meetings when possible, and sign where needed. We will take care of everything else. I had to accept the treasurer post by force.*

Shanti's narration illustrates that how the system controls or limits women getting influential position. Even though women encouraged by the legal provisions. Shanti wanted to lead the drinking water project as the chairperson, which is her right protected by the current legal provision. But the existing male authorities are not accepting women as leader. There could be unseen interest. Because one of the members tried to convince her to say to her, she would not have workloads. But she must sign up to the documents because of legal provision. She had to accept the treasured position by force instead of her interest in being the chairperson. Treasure is also vital post if the system provides positive support. I have seen in several projects were manipulating by authorities through systemic constraint for women.

Let me present at first Rojita's experience. Rojita shares with her experience legal provisions vs. Political practice as systemic barriers that still limit her leadership in meaningful participation.

*I have gained a wide range of experiences during my nearly five-year tenure as an active role as elected member of the local government. Over this period, I have observed an increase in women's participation in the development process. Which sounds good. Nevertheless, this intensification is primarily limited to fulfilling the numerical requirements mandated by policy provisions. Women's participation remains basically limited to the reserved seats, and not beyond that.*

Rojita's this narration highlights a critical aspect of systemic barriers in local governance: while legal frameworks have successfully increased the numerical presence of women in decision making bodies, just formal inclusion has not translated into meaningful participation. Her experience displays women's participation generally remains confined to reserved seats, signifying that the policies provisional representation does not automatically empower women for meaningful participation in development process. Without cooperative institutional apparatuses, capacity building opportunities, and genuine participation in development processes, women's numerical presence risks remaining tokenistic, highlighting the determined systemic barriers.

She continues as a powerful and specific example systemic barriers how limit to women's meaningful participation as follows:

*Although the legal provisions mandate gender friendly in leadership specifically, requiring political parties to nominate chairperson and vice chairperson candidates from different genders, this provision is rarely implemented in spirit. In practice, political parties always authorize male candidates for the chairperson position. I am not speaking out of my personal interest in becoming chairperson but simply stating a fact. As per my evaluation, she was qualified and capable of that position and people also liked her. She demonstrated well performance, working hard and honest. Unfortunately, the political party did not provide nomination for her. Finally, male got nomination and won the election.*

Rojita's explanation exemplifies how general and established fences continue to undermine women's significant presence in leadership position despite legal provisions are clear. While legal and policies mandate gender diversity in leadership at governance system, political leaders frequently nominate male candidates for top positions, sidelining qualified and capable women. Her experience shows the persistent gap between policy and practice.

Rojita has not stopped yet; she presents an example of the ward chairperson. She shares her expression as follows:

*I want to add an example of the ward committees. Here are seven wards in this municipality area. Male leads all the seven wards. Not only in this municipality, if you looked other municipalities no one female is in the top positions. Even in the service delivery offices and sections, women do not*

*occupy any leading position. You can hardly find women in meaningful decision-making positions in any component of the municipal units. Despite policies tends to promote women inclusion in governance system, these general practices continue to limit women's power.*

Rojita claims that despite legal provisions intend to ensure women participation with power, customary practices remain confined to in tokenistic roles, while all chairperson positions across the wards are held by men. She adds more, even within municipal service sections, women are not in leadership posts and meaningful decision-making positions. This condition exemplifies an important detach between policy and practice. Consequently, women's participation frequently remains performative, satisfying formal policy requirements without translating into genuine political influence. Constitution of Nepal ensures equal rights for leadership in all spheres, but existing system of local level indirectly controls to women to exercise power in development forums.

Batuli explains that while there is a lot of conversation about women's amplified participation in development, her experience presents this is not reality in practice at the local level. Existing systemic barriers control to women from leadership roles and then excluding them from real power exercise although legal provisions are seen in favor of women's empowerment. She expresses her experience as follows:

*Current legal provisions encouraged women's participation, my experience shows this is often more symbolic than substantive. During a road making project, I was offered the role of member of the road making user's committee. When I showed interest in being the Chairperson in its place the authorities rejected me strategically. Despite legal guidelines mandating that women hold vital roles, the men had already pre-selected as chairperson. They purposely entered the member's position. Later on, I came to know my role is not important. This experience discloses how legal directives are avoided in practice to ensure that real decision-making power breaks within traditional male dominated system.*

Batuli's experience illustrates a significant implementation gap where progressive legal provisions are neutralized by informal political practices. Although the policy provision confirms women's present to be vital roles, the committee's practice of pre-selection functions as a systemic narrowing mechanism. But for the

position of the chairperson was already decided prior to the meeting by instruction of the male authorities. This approach permits the local political system to fulfill legally mandated quota showing for the formality while ensuring that functional decision-making power remains concentrated within male authority. Ultimately, this evidence suggests that without addressing the informal networks that bypass formal rules, legal mandates for participation cannot be effective.

Here is the similar story of another woman Asha. Just there is different about the project, here is the project of road making. The previous was the project of the drinking waters supply. The similarities of these two are both infrastructural developments. As per my experience, mainly local leaders and bureaucrats are seen more interested in infrastructural developments. I heard the majority of the projects are run under setting of hidden interest from the authorities. I observed that women are not involved such setting and hidden setting some exceptional cases. Let me present another experience of Asha.

Asha describes her perception of how women's abilities are minimized and undervalued by systemic barriers education in participation at local level development. She expressed experience as follows:

*Once there was called community meeting. I also was invited there, but I did not know the agenda before. The leader announced the agenda, which was held to form a user's committee for our new drinking water project. He explained the women's participation stressing on meaningful participation. He presented the outline structure of the committee and criteria of at least thirty-three percentage women members, and that one of the major leadership roles would go to a woman. That was the mandatory legal provision for user's committee formation. I did not show any interest in taking part in any active because of my work domestic and social workload. Bu the leader proposed me take the role of tressure. I did not accept. Because ...Ummm. I have had bad and sad experiences already about the roles and unseen pressures. After discussion, I proposed, ok let me have the chairperson's role. Another male member leader highly encouraged and motivated insisting much for the treasure, but he did not support for the chairperson. Finally, they clapped my name, even though I was not satisfied.*

Asha's story provides a clear picture of how systemic process controls women for meaningful participation in local development forums, institutions and processes.

While she was requested to attend a community meeting, she did not know about the agenda before, which immediately proposed she take a role without her interest. This lack of prior information reflects a communication gap that systematically excludes women from preparatory discussions where critical decisions are informally shaped.

When the agenda turned to forming a user's committee for the drinking water project, Asha's lack of confidence in taking up a leadership position, particularly the treasurer's role stemmed from her limited educational background and unfamiliarity with financial procedures. Her unwillingness to receive the position means not a lack of willingness but rather a lack of technical knowledge and prior exposure, both of which are vital for performing such responsibilities effectively. The persistence from male leaders for her to take the position, despite her clear disagree, also reveals the tokenistic nature of participation. It is implicit that women are often chosen to fulfill the just to meet the legal requirement. Besides, her apprehension about time constraints due to household chores and agricultural work.

Asha's experience exemplifies the unseen inequality entrenched in local governance system. Even when prescribed participation objectives are met, without sufficient training, orientation, and access to information continues a procedure of symbolic participation. Asha physically attended but remained sidelined in decision. She adds more about how education limits restrict women's capability to engage meaningfully, resulting in positions with names but without real involvement. Additionally, Asha shares her experience as follows:

*When I did not accept their request, one of the male leaders, with support from a few women, convinced me, finally I accepted the position of treasurer. I explained that I had too many household responsibilities and very limited time, but they did not seem to take it seriously. Like many women in our community, I wanted to contribute, but the constant pressure of domestic work makes it extremely difficult. To convince me, one of the male leaders said, "Asha, you're perfect for this position. Don't worry, there's not much to do. Just you need to go to the bank once to operate an account and sign the checks, that's it. You can attend meetings when you are free and we'll take care of everything else. After a long discussion, I finally accepted the role and became the treasurer of the committee. But honestly, I didn't enjoy it. My involvement was very limited I went to the bank once, attended a few short meetings, and occasionally signed documents.*

Asha's narration clearly reflects how women's participation is often symbolic rather than functional, designed by deep-rooted gender norms and unequal responsibilities. The participant is stressed into taking the treasurer's position contempt clearly expressing restraints caused by household chores. Her unwillingness is dismissed, reflecting how women's time poverty is regulated and not taken seriously by male leaders. A periodic trend where women are advised to acquiesce status with limited power is exposed by the male authorities' persuading that the part is significant. It demonstrates a controlling approach in which women's role. Despite having a vital post, her role is limited to going bank, operating the account, and document signing. This indicates that participation is procedural but not participatory, reinforcing the structural barriers that prevent women from influencing the development process.

In general, the description proves how household responsibility, social prospects, and tokenistic guidance perform association to limit women's capability to meaningful participation. Even though the legal provisions have guaranteed women's participation in local development, there remains a wide breach between policy and practice. In maximum circumstances, women's parts are limited to fulfilling mandated quotas rather than exercising real power. The administrative system and male subjugated leadership culture remain to regulate the key decision-making places, parting women with limited impact over planning and implementation. Despite being formally represented, women's participation often present symbolic, as major discussions and power dynamics remain in the hands of men. It is seen that systemic barriers still prevent women's inclusion from becoming genuinely transformative in the local development process.

### **Educational and Informational Exclusion as a Fence to Women's Participation**

Basically, in rural society, inadequate education and limited access to information remain major barriers to women's meaningful participation in local development. Even though policies ensure women's participation, many still lack the education and administrative understanding necessary to engage effectively in planning and decision-making processes. Meetings and official procedures are often directed in bureaucratic culture that exclude less educated women, leaving them dependent on others for interpretation and guidance. This situation makes an elusive but persistent inequality women may be physically extant in decision making places,

yet their opinions and contributions continue forced by educational and informational difficulties.

Batuli is very enthusiastic for her community development. She is involved in different social activities but time and again she has trouble understanding the development policy documents. Many times, I missed meetings because of poor communication. Batuli says:

*I like to participate in local development through the local government. But my limited education often keeps me side. I completed basic schooling the I did not get chance to pursue further studies or receive training related to local governance. I frequently have trouble understanding the agenda and process discussions used with administrative terms, official documents, and complex procedures. The discussions often move rapidly, and I find myself hesitant about when or how to contribute. At the time being men appear more self-assured and qualified, while I feel nervous to express, be afraid of that I might speak something wrong. Despite my strong desire to participate, this lack of formal education and access to information makes me feel that my involvement is not fully valued and remains largely symbolic. I perceive I am less educated. Therefore, I cannot access new technologies the I cannot have enough information at the right time. That is why my participation in development cannot be effective.*

Batuli's narration significantly discloses showing that how limited education and lack of access to relevant information exclude women from meaningful participation in local development activities. Limited formal schooling produces a significant barrier; without delivering required communication and information for the development process, women fell themselves trapped behind a wall of jargon and complex procedures. Such exclusion is worsened by the digital divide. The incapability to use new technologies means women do not receive important information at the right time, leaving them ill-equipped to join fast-paced development debates. I understand from her conversation, she was talking about computer operating, email, intermate. This informational gap leads to a deep psychological barrier like fear and silence. Since she feels as low self-confidence and less knowledgeable thinking men more qualified. She perceives a sense of insufficiency. This perception of low self-confidence acts as a barrier that controls her

voice. As she expects to be judged for her lack of confidence. Ultimately, her participation remains locked at a symbolic status.

Similarly, Rita's express her understanding on how limited education and inadequate access to information can oblige women's meaningful participation in local development. Despite her position as an elected member, she often confronts institutional barriers, such as limited admittance to timely documentation and the technical trouble of steering official development procedures. Her experience reflects the hidden disparities that arise when educational and informational fences interconnect with gender discrimination, limiting women's capability to participate fully in development processes. She shares reflection as follows:

*As a locally elected women representative with limited formal education, I often feel uncomfortable to engage meaningfully in development processes. Numerous deliberations regarding budget allocation for development, project planning, and policy discussion conducted in advanced language that I could not understand. Then I feel that I am weaker than others due to my low educational background. Throughout meetings, information is often not explained in detail, and main development agendas are rarely shared in time, making it challenging to manage my schedule and participate fully.*

As per Rita's experience for locally elected women, limited formal education serves as a structural barrier that is further strengthened by the intended withholding of information. She highlights that the language used during meetings is more advanced for her. Many terminologies used during budgeting and planning she could not understand. For her, that is also barrier, making developmental administration feel inaccessible. As per her understanding, it is caused by less education. Such types of exclusion are exacerbated by a lack of transparency; receiving complex documents without prior explanation or timely notice prevents women from preparing meaningful inputs. Developmental documents and meeting agendas she cannot receive on time. Circulated documents and information are not understandable for her. This informational barrier is not just mechanical, but also social and psychological. She perceives as being not highly educated is deteriorated by discriminatory behavior of male leaders and bureaucrats. These approaches create an antagonistic environment where fear and silence are used as tools of marginalization.

When development agendas are not shared in time, women are systematically deprived of the opportunity to manage their schedules and lacking time to understand.

Consequently, this combination of educational gaps, late information, and gender-based discrimination ensures that their role remains a mere formality, uncovering their elected positions of practical power. It is important to understand the wider context in which her experience unfolds. Contempt the reality of inclusive policies, access to information, invitations to meetings, and opportunities for capacity building are not evenly distributed. As a result, a few women repeatedly represent the wider community, while many others remain excluded from these processes. This discriminatory inclusion creates an invisible boundary that limits learning, exposure, and empowerment for new or less connected women. In contradiction of this backdrop,

Sashi's experience reflects how limited access to information and participation preserves unequal involvement and symbolic representation in the local development process. Sashi shares her observation as closed circles: limited opportunities for broader women's engagement in community development dominating by few so called educated and elite women. Sashi she states her experience as follows:

*In our municipality, I have observed that the same group of limited women an elite circle is generally invited to meetings, and development discussions. They are close to the top leaders. Yes of course, they are seen as more educated and smarter too. They attend every program, appearing confident because they already possess formal education and social connections. But many other capable women from the community, including myself, are rarely informed or invited. Being ss a less educated woman, I feel there is an invisible barrier keeping me out of the circle. I do not receive the notices or the advanced information that this small group shares with the municipality. When I once asked why they don't include new faces and break the close bounded circle; I was told that those women already know how things work. But how will others learn if they are never given a chance? I perceive it due to lack of formal education is used to keep me outside. The municipality seems to prefer this small group because they are very smart. For me, it shows like the organization only rotates among a few familiar faces, maybe with vested interests. Because I don't have the same educational background or elite status, I am behind because I do not get right information at the right time, making it impossible for me to break into the close circle and contribute to development process to my community.*

Sashi's observation discloses an invisible barrier created by the intersection of educational status and communication informational hoarding. As per her understanding, formal education serves as a gatekeeping mechanism that authenticates to limited circle of women while marginalizing others general community women. By favoring women who are perceived as smarter more educated. The local government produces a closed route of participation. Only few women benefit from right-time information and special connections, while less educated women are systematically deprived of the notices about development meeting and so on. The explanation that elite women already know how things work functions as a structural barrier, preventing new and capable voices from entering the development process. This exclusion ensures that participation remains a rotation of familiar faces with vested interests as her claim. Accordingly, without access to the same educational background or timely documents, Sashi and other community women bordered outside. Her desire to contribute is stifled by a system that uses informational scarcity to maintain a social hierarchy, rendering her participation out of genuine participation of women.

Shanti shares her inferiority complex, difficulties, and hesitation as follows because of less education and consequences poor communication information.

*I am a rural woman having limited formal education. Being less educated I often feel weaker. I want to contribute to development and my actual ability to participate effectively but when I am present in meetings I cannot speak confidently. During discussions regarding budgeting, policy terms, and official procedures conducted at a high level, I feel a kind of hesitation myself. I often receive information too late, or sometimes without any explanation at all just it is said that there is meeting, you must come. This lack of timely information causes difficulties with time management and other preparations. Additionally, I am not skillful with new technologies, I cannot access the information and other details that educated men seem to have on their phones or computers. Sometimes I cannot understand and comprehend the documents placed in front of me. While more educated members and male leaders navigate these procedures easily. I keep me silent myself getting nervous. This combination of late information, technical jargon, and my own educational background makes me feel like my participation is just a requirement for a checklist, rather than a meaningful participation.*

Shanti's experiences show clearly how educational and informational exclusion constructs an invisible barrier that separates rural women from meaningful participation in development process. As her understanding limited formal education acts as the primary barrier, weakening self-confidence and making various policy language difficult to interpret. This internal hesitation is reinforced by external practical failures, specifically the delayed sharing of critical meeting information. When women receive information late to prepare, they are refuted the opportunity to form considerable arguments or manage their time effectively. Subsequently, these educational gaps and informational delays transform their presence into mere symbolic effort, where they are physically included but rationally excluded.

Additionally, Shanti adds her perception as she noticed her male colleagues influence in decision with high confidence, but I perceive being back due to her nervousness assuming weaker member herself. She adds her experience as follows:

*I often hesitate to participate in development through the official process. I am afraid with my less educational status thinking I would not understand the process. I think that I cannot understand the complexities of development administration. Despite my eagerness to contribute, the low educational keeps me back. Predominantly I just listen to others than speak during meetings because I cannot be updated by new development policies and information by reading myself comparatively highly educated person.*

Shanti's experience exemplifies how low educational status limit women from the participation in development process. She perceives that she would not understand the development administrative process even though she is very interested in participating in development process. I understand through the conversation it is her psychological perception to keep herself with lack of confidence because of limited educational status. It is seen that education plays a significant role in women's empowerment for development process.

Summarizing the theme based on above discussion, it is apparent that limited formal education and lack of access to appropriate and understandable information meaningfully confine women's meaningful participation in local development. Even when women are formally included in meetings or in important discussion places, they often struggle to understand administrative and technical terms, policy guidelines, and planning documents, which weakens their self-assurance and ability to contribute in effective way. Additionally, women perceive excluded from important

informational communication dissemination, creating a determined knowledge gap. The descriptions show women perceive themselves as less proficient due to their limited formal education, and societal conventions about their capacities underpin these barriers. The women participants perceive that some male members and community people often indulge less educated women as less capable, further discouraging active participation. As a result, women's attendance in development often remains symbolic rather than effective. Educational and informational exclusion thus signifies a critical structural barrier, systematically limiting women's agencies, decision making power, and capacity to influence development activities.

### **Practical Constraints and Institutional Negligence for Women's Participation**

While legal provisions of reservation policies opened formal spaces for women's participation in local development, practical realities and institutional shortcomings continue to bound their engagement. These day-to-day constraints make it difficult for women to participate effectively, despite their just presence in planning meetings, programs, and monitoring and other development activities. This theme examines how institutional negligence and operational obstacles interconnect with social aspects to establish environments that are formal inclusive but in practical field discouraging for women members as per their understanding. Even motivated and capable women find their participation controlled by factors that are structural, procedural, and cultural practice.

In this context Rita's perceptions, it is significant to know that, while policies and quotas have increased women's presence in local development spaces, practical realities often limit their capability to participate meaningfully. Rita's explanations how these practical constraints intersect with institutional neglect, making it difficult for women to effectively in development processes.

*Practically it is not easy to perform participation in local development activities. It sounds good to say women's participation is appreciatively encouraged but inside there are so many things as hurdles. Let me share my experience. As being an elected women representative, I must bear so many things. People especially women expect much more from my side, but achievement is not getting as expected. Specially in municipality, I am often late to reach the office of the municipality, because it is far from my home and I must leave meeting before completion. I must finish my household daily responsibilities before leaving home and in the early evening I have to reach*

*home. That is why I could not participate in meetings, planning sessions, and monitoring activities as I wish these were my practical difficulties. Even when I am physically present, the institutional system does not take my practical difficulties and realities into account. When I go to different service centers and offices carrying developmental agendas, the institutional system does not support. I perceive those institutions have not women friend languages, cultures and behaviors. These challenges are not just mine they are the everyday reality for almost every woman in in our society, that hindering for meaningful participation in local development extremely difficult.*

Rita's description narrates her practical challenges of meaningful participation. The office of the municipality and other developmental institutions are far distance from her residence. Her household chores, family responsibilities and official responsibilities of elected members are heavy burdens which create significant practical constraints on her time. Ultimately, the system's refusal to adapt its procedures to the lived experiences of women ensures that their involvement remains a symbolic presence rather than a meaningful participation in development process.

Shanti has a strong desire to contribute to development activities. Let me present Shanti's experience, in which she shares her lived reality and reflects on how social perceptions and value related to women's participation outline her engagement:

*Personally, I am very interested in engaging more actively in development activities through my rural municipalities. When came new constitution, formed local government as fundamental development center with big power as government. But the reality is that our society and local institutions still do not make it easy for me as a woman. Even when I make the effort to attend meetings or participate in community work, my presence is not always welcomed or valued in development institutions practically. When I put my development agendas to the developmental institutions usually, I experience unsupportive behaviors. Sometimes it feels as if the system and people around me are silently saying I don't belong here. In the majority of the developmental sections and units do not trust me. Many times, I must go to take male leader to prove my agendas. In many of the institutions I do not find women friendly language and behaviors practically. These invisible barriers both social and institutional make it difficult to contribute fully to my community development.*

Shanti's is highly enthusiastic woman to be participated in development activities. She has been more excited after promulgating new constitution and formation of the local government under new federal system. But based on her expression, discloses frustrating experience. While she is personally motivated to lead, the system operates through uncooperative behaviors and a lack of trust that forces her to seek validation from male leaders to make her agendas perceived. She finds institutional environment is not women friendly. She perceives such behaviors characterized by exclusionary language and slangs code that signal she does not feel comfortable to participate. Accordingly, the institution does not merely fail to assist with her practical restraints; it actively delegitimizes her authority, requiring a male intermediary to prove her worth. This ensures that even when women are physically present, they remain trapped behind invisible practical and institutional barriers of meaningful participation.

Rima has experienced practical challenges in balancing her household responsibilities, teaching duties, and community engagement. Her explanation exemplifies how household responsibilities and official procedures can limit her to involve in development activities. She shares her experience as follows:

*My participation in development activities has shown me the huge workload barrier of socio-cultural expectations. As a local schoolteacher and recently the treasurer for a community building project, my days are constant juggle. They typically begin with a series of household tasks: cleaning, cooking, preparing my children for school, and making sure everything at home runs smoothly. Even after finishing these chores, I often feel mentally exhausted before starting my official work. Not only for me, I know many women in my community who receive no help at all and sometimes even face criticism for attending meetings or taking part in development activities.*

Rima's description demonstrates practical and institutional contests intersect with socio cultural prospects to compel women's meaningful participation in local development. Rima explains her daily work burden as a continuous starting to work in the early morning finishing household chores and attending development activities. Even by a supportive husband, Rima emphasizes the mental and physical exhaustion that accumulates, illustrating how women must expend significant effort just to be present in decision making spaces. She remembers her friends, who are interested in

participating in development, who do not get family support, it is so hard for them to participate in development process.

It reveals that official and community structures do not sufficiently deliberate women's realities, often creating barriers that limit effective participation. Her understanding further emphasizes the invisible and systemic nature of these limits. Because of time constraints and competing household responsibilities reduce her ability to contribute to development activities meaningfully, even when she is just physically attended. It demonstrates that reserved attendance alone such participation just as holding positions keep far for true participation, where practical realities are overlooked through the theoretical lens of Gender and Development (GAD). Here Rima's experience demonstrates practical engagement effectively. Such types of social structure and institutional insignificance neutralize women's participation. Her description confirms that meaningful participation in local development requires not only legal provisions, but also institutional mindfulness, logistical support, and recognition of women lived realities, which are often absent in practice.

Analyzing the data narration, I clearly realize that despite women's growing presence in local development forums, their participation continues to be limited by deep-rooted socio-cultural expectations. Many women, including those I interviewed with, are constantly balancing domestic responsibilities, caregiving duties, and public roles what I see as carrying a triple burden. These traditional gender roles not only consume women's time and energy but also restrict their ability to engage fully in development processes like meetings, planning, implementing and monitoring activities. Even when they join, their role often remains dominated by exhaustion and the pressure to return home to household duties. I understand that until these structural and cultural barriers are addressed, women's participation will remain more of an obligation than an empowered and meaningful practice.

Another participant Batuli faces similar challenges being less educated woman. She stances out as another exemplary figure in local development activities, contributing both formally and informally. Just last month, she finished her role as treasurer for a municipal funded local road making project. Her experiences are closely mirrored by Rita's, particularly regarding the challenges she faces due to her limited formal education. Batuli adds her story continuing:

*The barriers I face are not just individual; they are built into the very structure of my daily life and the institutions that are supposed to help me. From the*

*moment I step out of my door, I am considered down by a society that expects me to handle everything at home while offering me no path to joining outside of it. This creates a cycle where I am physically present in my community but systematically excluded from its progress. My days are boundless struggles besides practical restrictions. I am constantly occupied with a double burden of behavioral and practical workload: I manage extensive household duties and child-rearing while simultaneously performing the back-breaking work of raising animals and agricultural farming. This persistent workload leaves me in a state of long-lasting tiredness. It is not that I lack the determination to be economically independent; it is that I just lack the time and energy to follow a career when my survival depends on this volunteer job. When I do attempt to engage in social development activities, I face institutional negligence that makes me feel invisible. At the office of the municipality, there is no women friendly culture. I attend meetings only to find a complete lack of orientation; officials speak in technical jargon and follow administrative procedures that are never described to us. This failure of the institution to provide clear communication means that my participation is often just a signature on an attendance sheet rather than a meaningful participation. The combination of being drained by work at home and overlooked by the local government creates a wall that prevents me from ever doing meaningful participation.*

Batuli's practical experience exemplifies a complex situation as practical constraints and institutional negligence as a barrier for her participation in development process. Overload of work, unfamiliar working environments always hinder for effective participation, where the double burden of household chores and agricultural work make a total lack of time. This persistent overtiredness is a structural result of the unequal distribution of non-monetized work, which serves as a primary barrier to economic empowerment. This personal struggle is further compounded by a non-responsive institutional culture at the municipal level. The invisible wall described by the description exposes a significant lack of Gender-Sensitive Institutions; the institution fails to provide the simplified communication, support, or orientation necessary for meaningful participation. By overlooking the specific needs of women and relying on administrative, the local development practices tokenism. This institutional negligence does not just fail to help; it actively

strengthens the social exclusion as Batuli faces at her context, transforming potential participation into a mere administrative formality.

Despite being elected to formal positions, many women representatives face significant challenges in performing their roles effectively specially for local development agendas. These contests are not only due to personal confines but are often reinforced by practical constraints and a lack of official support, which limit their ability to participate effectively in planning, decision making, and other development activities. In this regard Rojita shares her experience as follows:

*As an elected woman representative, I gained a big experience many challenges performing out the role. Understanding complex official procedures and navigating administrative paperwork is extremely difficult, not just because of my limited education but also due to the lack of orientation, guidance, and support from institutions. Community members expect me to bring development projects for the community. But I must struggle to get approval of developmental projects because there is limited power exercise for me. But from the outsides is seen high sounding opportunities for women that I can get achieve easily. These gaps in official support, joint with my daily household responsibilities and social obligations, make it very difficult to participate meaningfully in development processes in a substantial way.*

Rojita shares her experience of facing a big challenge, a deep-seated institutional negligence where the organization fails to deliver the necessary orientation or guidance for new members. These procedures are not women friendly, effectively marginalizing those with limited formal education and experience. Additionally, severe source restraints mean that while these women hold the responsibilities, they lack the practical assistance and training required to exercise their authority. This gap between their accountability and their actual power leaves women without the tools of the trade to deliver development activities. The workload of daily household responsibilities and social duties limit to participating in development activities. These aspects generate a systemic environment that discourages meaningful participation.

### **Interconnecting Barriers and the Continuum of Disempowerment**

Even though women's participation in local development has formally increased due to inclusive constitutional and policy provisions, their real empowerment remains controlled by multiple interconnecting barriers. Women's

experiences disclose that socio cultural expectations, limited education, economic dependence, and institutional bias interact in complex ways, creating a cycle that continuously undermines their self-confidence, inspiration, and decision-making power. In my experience, barriers are interconnected to each other that make it more complex and hinder women's meaningful participation. As a result, women's inclusion often becomes tokenistic rather than transformative, placing them in supportive or symbolic roles. This connection of multiple difficulties procedures what can be understood as a continuum of disempowerment, where even elected women members struggle to exercise real power. These interconnecting barriers significantly limit women for meaningful participation in local development.

Rita's experience demonstrates that how an elected women must struggle to manage multiple interconnecting barriers in participation at local government level. Her story demonstrates how structural, social, and personal constraints combine to limit women's ability to implement real influence. She shares her experience as follows:

*I want to share about my experience as a women member of the municipality. When I started my journey into the municipality it illustrates a continuum of disempowerment where one obstacle persistently activates the next. It starts at home; there are several unseen chains of works as I mentioned before because of that I usually reached late than other male members. Because of that I missed the initial briefing with introduction of the agendas that associate with my inability to follow the procedures. from such things then support my male peers to minimize my effectiveness on participation. Once I had to leave a very important workshop about the "leadership building" because of my household responsibilities. That was residential program outside of my village. I could not stay outside of the home. These types of obstacles are interconnected and never ending for a woman. Not only for me other women members also are suffering these types of problem. Therefore, I experience it is not easy to participate in development process.*

As Rita's explanation of this narrative demonstrates that how the chain of interconnection of barriers, limit women for meaningful participation. She has several examples about it. Here she presented how she is suffering from time management for domestic and municipal multiple responsibilities for her. Here, I can understand clearly that disempowerment is a cumulative process their barriers are

strategically interconnected to keep women in symbolic or formal just for meeting the legal requirements. The continuum is evident in how household responsibilities trigger a sequence of professional failure: missing the briefing leads to a knowledge and capacity building opportunity as well.

From the lens of Gender and Development viewpoint, this explanation underscores that women's disempowerment in local development is multi-dimensional and collective. Tokenistic presence, lack of support, limited technical information, knowledge, skill, and socio-cultural pressures collectively sustain the cycle of barring, making it inadequate to address only one feature of the barriers. Currently, we are realizing and targeting this unified web of restraints to transform women's participation from symbolic to practical.

The perseverance of multiple unified barriers continues to limit women's genuine empowerment in rural governance and development contexts. Those who hold professional or facilitative roles within local government often confront understated yet powerful forms of exclusion that prevent them from exercising real inspiration.

Rima's understanding developed while working for local women cooperatives as executive's member. She has experience working in different local development activities involving members and treasure as well. She shares her experience and perception about the interconnected barriers for meaningful participation being a woman.

She shares her observation as follows:

*As a woman it is not easy to participate through local government procedures. I like to participate but there are so many challenges for meaningful participation. Having worked in the local development activities, cooperatives services and managing the household responsibilities, it is very difficult to manage time. I must spend more time inside home, but these are not seen. At the mean time I must be participated in cooperative activities and go to the municipal office or project sites. I could not be able to manage those things due to my too many work responsibilities. I do not have access of well transportation facilities. Because of that sometimes I have to give just my signature in the name list of meeting attendance books to fulfil the legal requirements. Because of interconnected workload I always be in rush. Sometimes I could not sleep well.*

Rima's explanation of her experience shows the interconnecting barriers limit their participation. She has triple burden of work as unseen but time-consuming domestic work, cooperative services and local developmental activities through municipality. As Rima's understanding through the transition from systemic exclusion sometimes she has to give her signature without being involved to fulfill the legal requirement. It means women are suffering from different types of barriers connected that unable to manage time to understand the process in detail that is important for meaningful participation.

Women's proper inclusion in local development does not mechanically translate into meaningful participation. In rural society, elected women often face multiple, overlapping barriers including socio cultural expectations, limited formal education, and restrictive institutional practices that jointly pressure their agency.

Batuli's experience exemplifies how these intersecting challenges operate together, leaving women visible in developmental decision system but with inadequate power to influence decisions, illustrating the continuum of disempowerment that shapes women's participation in local development processes. Batuli shares her experience as follows:

*I am more optimistic in new system of federalism. Under we have our local government nearer. In the new system of local governance, my participation often feels like a performance rather than a practice of power. While I sit at the table and discuss about the development seeking my space, I perceive controlled by a continuum of disempowerment that begins long before. At home, the weight of heavy household responsibilities consumes the time I need to study complex administrative procedures; my limited formal education is weaponized against me using exclusionary administrative and technical jargon and policy documents designed to be impassable. The organizational procedures reinforced by a social situation where male members and officials control the situation on their intension. Each barrier social expectation, educational gap, and institutional elitism interlocks to ensure that while I am formally present, I remain practically silenced. My presence is a muffled success; it is a symbolic presence that lacks the real power to interrupt a system built to function without me.*

Batuli's experience illustrates in the context of rural municipal governance, the continuum of disempowerment manifests as a seamless transition from private-sphere

restraints to public-sphere exclusion. This explanation as based on her perception discloses that women's experiences are defined by interconnecting barriers where household work burdens and educational gaps are not simply personal hurdles, but structural susceptibilities subjugated within the development process. When the narrator enters the municipal space, these vulnerabilities are met with institutional gatekeeping, characterized using administrative and technical jargon and male-dominated policy discourse. This creates a feedback loop: the socio-cultural assumption of female inability justifies the symbolic rather than practical participation. Accordingly, women the development procedure remains a place of less power sharing. Where women are just for fulfill the legal formalities. It seems opposite as Batuli has optimistic enthusiasm to her expectation through the local government, under new governing system, federalism.

The complex realities of women's participation in local development often extend beyond single, visible obstacles. As per their experience women have to confronts with multiple interconnected barriers. Even when legal provisions ensure meaningful participation extend from gender bias and technical exclusion to limit to women to entertain the legal rights.

In this context, Rojita's experience shows how women's engagement, though observable, often remains symbolic rather than meaningful participation in development processes. She shares her experience as follows:

*Once I wished for a new irrigation project for my ward, the chief told me to coordinate the process only through women's group meetings, remarking that the construction details are for the engineers and us. Largely of the time, I am asked merely to sign prepared documents without being given clear explanations about their content. Even though I was elected by the people, I often feel demoted and excluded from meaningful decision making compared to other male colleagues. I have experiences are further complicated by limited institutional support, practical constraints, and the understated but tenacious postulation that women lack technical capability.*

Rojita's explanation of experience demonstrates how multiple and intersecting fences combine to limit women's meaningful participation in local development. This condition replicates the range of disempowerment, where women's participation is visible in numbers but not in real fields. By dismissing her ability in favor of male expertise, the system exposes the gendered barriers that still limit women power.

Moreover, the lack of official support and information worsens her excluding, reinforcing dependence on male members or authorities. Collectively, such types overlapping barriers keep women formally present within development procedures but largely disempowered in determining policies and influencing development outcomes.

From this interpretation, it is evident that women's participation in local development, though formally mandated, is constrained by multiple overlapping barriers that operate simultaneously across social, educational, and institutional domains. Deep-rooted socio-cultural customs and patriarchal set up of gender role place heavy over loaded household responsibilities to women, limit their participation. At the same time, educational and informational constraints reduce women's confidence and procedural understanding, making them vulnerable to exclusion in technical discussions and decision-making processes.

The experiences of women participant illustrate how these barriers intersect and reinforce each other, creating a range of disempowerment. When women have got mandated post, their involvement often limited as subordinated rather than influencing power. Usually, women must do struggle to balance household responsibilities with developmental tasks as per assigned role. Due to lack of access to capacity enhancing opportunities and facing negative gendered norms that reduce their influence.

### **Essence of the Chapter**

Based on this analysis, I understand it is evident that women's participation in local development is controlled by multiple, interconnected fences that operate at structural, institutional, and individual stages. Structural and socio-cultural standards continue to bound women's agencies, such as patriarchal social structure, traditionally divided gender roles, and stereotyping demoralize women's self-assurance and confine their participation. Here is seen that women are often kept inside of the boundaries of household. They have more family, societal and household responsibilities. Keeping these strict boundaries their capability is frequently questioned, which discourages them in meaningful participation in development. Based on discussion in this chapter existing administrative procedures, intervention of the interest groups, resource capturing, women are confined in only to sign documents just to fulfill the legal provisions. Because of low educational background and lack of information communication limits unseen disparities. Practical limits, including lack

of training, inadequate resources, socio-culturally controlling mobility limit women's ability to participate effectively in development activities. Importantly, these hurdles do not operate in isolation; rather, they intersect to create a continuum of disempowerment, ensuring that women's participation, however legally mandated, often remains symbolic rather than practical participation.

## CHAPTER VI

### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

An interpretative inquiry method was employed in this study to examine women's experiences of participation in development. This chapter presents the results of my study on women's participation in local development processes, synthesizing the understandings with participant's experience through in-depth interviews, and my own field experiences. The chapter is alienated into two main units: the Findings unit and the Discussion unit. These findings reflect the multifaceted reality of women's meaningful inclusion in local development system.

The discussion unit shapes these findings by interpreting them through two theoretical frames. Participatory Development Theory and Gender and Development Theory, situating the analysis within the context of current legal frameworks, and comparing them with relevant empirical studies. In this section I analyze the of women members participation hardly performing in to meaning way. The finding identifies the deeply rooted gender bias socio-culture limit for women's meaningful participation.

#### **Findings of the Study**

I have presented the empirical findings of my interpretive inquiry into women lived experiences of participation in local development. The examination is constructed upon the narrative data collected from participants, revealing the multi-layered nature of inclusion in practice and the determined fences that limit meaningful participation in development process.

My very significant finding concerning women's involvement is the prevalence of tokenism and symbolic representation. I found that although legal frameworks positively ensure women's participation, the actual practice often results in a clear gap between participation in procedure and effect in constituent. My research participants consistently reported that their roles are often limited to meeting the mandated formalities, such as being asked to sign documents or attending meetings, while the practical decision-making forums continue fundamentally dominated by the high authorities. It is identified that the stakeholder women's

experience their agendas are rarely included into actionable plans with required budget allocations.

I also found that the development program itself reproduces a clear gender bias in budget allocation. Rural Municipality as a local government continues to prioritize physical infrastructure projects (e.g., roads making and building construction), although programs for women's capacity-building and economic strengthening receive negligible consideration. This pattern shows that although women are present in planning forums, their priorities are frequently categorized as secondary, thus reinforcing a systemic imbalance in how development value is constructed, and resources are distributed. Additionally, I understand that many income generative and women's economic empowerment programs lack market linkages and long-term sustainability, limiting genuine economic unconventionality.

The restraints on women's encouragement are not isolated; rather, they emerge from a range of consistent barriers. I found that persistent socio-cultural norms, attitudes rooted in deeply entrenched patriarchal arrogances and traditional gender roles, constitute a leading barrier. These cultural prospects directly restrict women's self-assurance, motivation and legality in local development. This contest is further joined by the burden of household responsibilities and the fear of social criticism, which harshly limits the time available for effective participation. Crucially, I observed that the persistence of stereotyping often leads to women's competence being frequently questioned, thereby discouraging proactive and meaningful involvement in governance. The structures of decision-making continue basically male-dominated, and women are often excluded from strategic planning and important deliberations where final decisions are shaped. This inconsistency is sustained by the weak and fragmented implementation of inclusion policies, indicating that institutional accountability and political will being necessary for genuine change are often absent.

I also found that knowledge and capacity constraints are practical limitations that are actively exploited. The study data presented that inadequate formal education, inadequate access to information, and unfamiliarity with administrative procedures condense women's ability to participate confidently in local development activities. I observed that male counterparts frequently exploit this vulnerability to exclude women from substantive discussions, effectively turning an educational gap into an active tool of marginalization. Furthermore, participants reported facing practical

constraints, including a notable lack of necessary training, resources, and institutional support, which contributes to feelings of being frustrated and demotivated.

Despite these deep and interconnecting restrictions, my analysis also identifies inspiring signs of transformation and the gradual emergence of agency among women representatives in local level. This study explore that women are positively developing better consciousness on the fundamental rights and responsibilities in development participation. As a result, it moves from passive to meaningful participation.

Women's disempowerment is intensified by multiple intersecting barriers that reinforce one another. The examination clearly establishes that the legal provisions provide a well framework for women's participation, but the on-the-ground reality is one where symbolic effort, socio-cultural pressure, and systemic inconsistency collaboratively ensure that meaningful participation remains an encounter. Women have achieved descriptive representation, but they are critically limited in achieving substantive representation. The Discussion section that follows will now interpret these findings through relevant theoretical lenses to explain this persistent gap between policy intent and lived experience.

### **Discussion of the Study**

In this section, I discuss the findings to address the first research question: how women experience and perceive their participation in the local development process. This discussion is constructed on two things information from detailed interviews and my own experience in the field of development. To comprehend the results, I used two main theories Participatory Development (PDT) and Gender and Development (GAD). I also studied current government policies and other research studies to help explain the findings.

#### **Policy Commitment Does Not Guarantee Practice**

From this analysis, I found that contempt strong policy promises to women's participation in local development, the practical understanding of these commitments remains incomplete. Local government organizations formally embrace the language of participation and gender equity; though, the instruments for interpreting these principles into meaningful action are weak. This reflection resonates closely with Participatory Development Theory (PDT), which emphasizes that genuine participation must go beyond formal symbol to ensure that persons, particularly marginalized women, are actively engaged in decision making and benefit straight

from development products (Chambers, 1997). As I understood aligns with more pseudo involvement, is recorded in attendance lists or meeting minute books but rarely influences actual planning, budgeting, or implementation of development process.

Inside the framework of Gender and Development (GAD) Theory, such gap between policy and practice replicates the perseverance of structural inequalities that shape how gender is created and ratified within institutions (Cornwall, 2016; Moser, 1993). Development cannot be gender unbiased; rather, it must challenge power relations that marginalize women from decision making seats. The theory does not recognize fulfilling gender quotas just showing numerical presence as real participation. If there is no addressed to eliminate deep institutional biases or patriarchal domination on decision-making power. As per my understanding, this distinct develops noticeably in the way local development prioritizes agendas. While strategic plan documents and national frameworks advocate gender friendly development, functioning executes often return to conventional, male dominated modes of decision making. Women's participation remains procedural, not practical. Participatory Development Theory reminds us that true participation involves shared control over resources, decision making power, and outcomes as well. Yet, the women representatives I interacted with often found their suggestions overlooked or delayed under the excuse of technical or budgetary limitations.

Legal framework, particularly the Constitution 2015, *the Local Level Election Act, 2017*, and following regulations, establish provisions for women quotas and balanced representation in executive roles (GoN, 2017b & NLC, 2015). Despite these provisions, my data designates that formal policy commitment has not automatically produced practical change in governance processes. Constitutional and legal frameworks create opportunities for women's participation, but they do not remove institutional norms and political practices that form how those chances are understood.

Through the lens of Participatory Development Theory, such gap becomes clear: participation is not simply physical presence or substantial of reserved spaces, but requires real impact over agenda setting, resource distribution, and outcomes (Arnstein, 1969; Cornwall, 2008). My field observations reveal numerous instances of pseudo participation, where women are present in committees, yet key decisions are

made informally by a core group, and women's inputs hardly change budgetary or programmatic results.

The Gender and Development theoretical approach digs this interpretation by focusing on the social and cultural relations in gender perspective. It argues that gender mainstreaming and responsive procedures must address power relatives and structural disparities, not merely add women into existing structures (Kabeer, 2005; Moser, 1993). Tools such as Gender Responsive Budgeting (GRB) and Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) guidelines have been indorsed to operationalize gender concerns in planning and finance that focus women's empowerment. However, empirical assessments designate uneven implementation of GRB and weak follow-through in local development planning series (Sijapati, 2023; Tamang, 2019). Policy apparatuses, though present, are often implemented as procedural checklists rather than mechanisms that transform decision making cultures and resource flows in gender sensitive and women empowerment ways.

Recent studies confirm these field observations. Analyses of post 2017 local elections and governance practices show a notable increase in the numerical presence of women in local bodies, while documenting persistent limits to their authority. Women are often placed in assistant roles with limited decision-making power, and gender quotas have not eliminated casual party policies or elite capture that reservation male dominance in substantive leadership position (Silwal & Budhathoki, 2025). These studies underscore an application discrepancy: law and policy have advanced women empowerment on paper, but political behavior, administrative capability, and socio-cultural norms arbitrate how inclusion translates into practice.

From a policy exercise viewpoint, converting policy commitment into meaningful practice requires more than regulation. Procedures include targeted capacity building for women representatives (such as financial literacy, budget understanding, negotiation skills), strengthened gender responsive budgeting linking allocations to determinate gender outcomes, institutional accountability mechanisms and political reforms that discourage token nominations while reassuring substantive placement of women in decision-making roles. Positioning practice with policy requires simultaneous reforms in institutional culture, administrative procedures, and encouragement structures reliable with both Participatory Development and GAD viewpoints.

### **Women's Participation Remains Symbolic Rather than Meaningful**

Based on the analysis of the data, I found that women's participation in local development has increased by numerical aspect after the federal governing system established, but their presence often remains symbolic rather than meaningful. Even though policies mandate women's inclusion in elected positions and local development committees, their participation is frequently limited to attendance and formal recognition rather than meaningful engagement in decision making process. Women are present in the system, but they seldom have the authority or influence on shape priorities, budgets, or development outcomes.

Numerous women members in my study shared their experience that they were invited to meetings but rarely asked acknowledged for their agendas. Some participants mentioned that their explanations were collected in the documents but did not discuss further implementable decisions. This pattern demonstrates that women's participation often functions as a procedural requirement what one participant describes as a formality we have to complete. Such narratives reflect what scholars describe as tokenistic where inclusion limited in numerical aspect.

The theoretical framework, as expressed by Chambers (1997) and Cornwall (2008), argues that authentic participation requires shared control over resources, decision making, and outcomes. Participation is transformative only when it moves power relations and enables targeted groups to define their development priorities. However, what I observed aligns more with instrumental participation where women are included to legitimize decisions rather than to encouragement them. Their inclusion satisfies just for policy requirement but does not challenge existing power exercise.

Through the Gender and Development (GAD) viewpoint, this symbolic participation can be seen as an outcome of structural and relational disparities that shape gender dynamics in development. The GAD approach (Kabeer 1999; Moser, 1993) highlights that development must address unequal gender power relations rather than simply including women into established structures. My findings recommend that current gender inclusion policies have intensive more on quantitative or numerical attendance ensuring that women occupy mandated quota than on meaningfully effective transformation of power structures. The continuity of male-dominated decision-making, patriarchal attitudes, and informal systems remains to weaken women's substantive participation. This reality replicates Rai and Spray's

(2019) concept of the ‘illusion of inclusion’ in development, where the formal attendance of women in governance seats frequently covers the organizational and performative fences that prevent women from using real transformative influence.

Existing constitutional and legal frameworks are progressive in ensuring women’s representation. *The Constitution of Nepal, 2015* (Nepal Law Commission [NLC], 2015) ensures for at least thirty-three percentage women’s participation in all the institutions and structures that guarantees as fundamental right. *The Local Level Election Act, 2017* Government of Nepal [GoN], 2017a) requires that either the chair or deputy chair of each rural municipality be a woman, and that at least 40 percent of local representatives be women members. Likewise, the Gender Equality and *Social Inclusion Strategy, 2017*) and the *National Gender Equality Policy, 2021*, seeks mainstream gender viewpoints in all governance processes. These policies are commendable for establishing a foundation of formal inclusion. However, as my show, women’s attendance has not yet been translated into transformative practice in the real field.

As per my understanding, this situation exemplifies how participation without power fails to fulfill the essence of both participatory and gender responsive development. The theory of participatory development views that empowerment emerges through practice by engaging people in real decision making, fostering ownership, and enabling reflection on power relations (Chambers, 1997). The finding as women participation confined to limit as symbolic attendance. Similarly targeted leadership and negotiation training for women representatives, the combination of Gender Responsive Budgeting (GRB) linked to determinate outcomes, and improvements in social practices to indorse women’s access to executive decision-making roles. Moreover, the local governments must institutionalize mechanisms for accountability such as participatory audits and inclusive monitoring committees ensuring that women’s voices are not only heard but also acted upon.

The indication from this study demonstrates that while numerical representation is not an important milestone, it is not the same with meaningful participation. Meaningful participation necessitates shifting from ritual compliance to real and practical participation where women can entertain having equal power to influence in decisions, setting priorities, share control and utilize over resources. Aligning with both TPD and GAD frameworks, women’s representation becomes

transformative only when it disturbs existing hierarchies and redefines power relations in local development process.

### **Development Priorities Reflect Gender Bias**

Based on my analysis, I found that development priorities at the local level continue to reflect a clear gender bias, prioritizing physical infrastructures such as road constructions and building making. Even though policies guidelines strongly emphasize inclusion and women friendly planning. The projects that focus on women's skill enhancement, entrepreneurship, or economic empowerment accept much less consideration, often being categorized as lesser or more optional. Women's proposals such as small-scale training on food processing, bamboo craft, or livestock improvement were often sidelined in favor of large infrastructure projects.

This study, male leaders' interests much more focused on physical infrastructural development such as road construction or community buildings are often perceived as community priorities, while women's needs related to income generation, time saving technologies, leadership capacity building are treated as soft issues. This indicates that gender bias is embedded not only in policy execution but also in how development value is socially constructed.

The *Constitution of Nepal, 2015* and the *Local Government Operation Act, 2017* authorized participatory, and gender responsive development planning. Further, the *Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Strategy, 2018* and *Gender Responsive Budgeting framework* were introduced to ensure that women's priorities are systematically integrated into local development processes (MoFALD, 2021). However, my field experience and other empirical studies reveal that these instruments are rarely implemented as intended. Sijapati (2023) found that Gender Responsive Budgeting practices in local governments are applied as procedural aspect and budgets are labeled as gender responsive, but actual allocations for women's economic programs remain minimal. These results resonance a determined reality: gender-responsive policies have nevertheless to demolish the systemic preference for physical infrastructure over initiatives personalized to women. Such gendered inequity in priority setting reveals how inclusiveness has not converted the decision-making culture. As Kabeer (2005) argues, empowerment requires not only access to spaces of participation but also the ability to define what counts as valuable knowledge and legitimate development need. In my study, women representatives demonstrated awareness and initiative they proposed practical, resource based, and

locally appropriate programs but lacked institutional support and resources to turn these ideas into action. Consequently, their participation remains limited to consultation rather than co decision making.

### **Income generative Empowerment Programs: Lacking Market Linkages**

I found that various income generative projects for economic empowerment programs women exist at the local level, they often lack long term sustainability and effective market linkages. In many of the words I studied, local governments had initiated short term skill development trainings, for example, sewing, pickle making, or handicrafts but nearly all these activities did not continue after the initial phase. The trained women frequently faced difficulties in accessing markets, obtaining raw materials, or managing production and distribution channels. As a result, the agendas continued largely project oriented, with limited outcomes for constant income generation. Many participants expressed that the training gave them new skills but not connected to economic opportunity. This reflects a broader pattern of development interventions that focus more on activity completion than on the creation of viable employment schemes.

When viewed through the Participatory Development Theory (PDT), this situation discloses the parameters of top down, supply driven approaches to women's empowerment. PDT argues that genuine development should arise from the active participation of local people in identifying their real needs, managing resources, and sustaining outcomes (Chambers, 1997; Cornwall, 2008). However, what I found in the field aligns with participation as implementation, where local women are invited to attend trainings designed by external experts or officials, but they have little say in important the content, scale, or market orientation of those programs. The partial form of participation weakens the very spirit of participatory development, which demands that community members be active partners, not passive receivers in shaping economic initiatives that touch their lives.

Gender And Development theory emphasizes that development should convert gender relations by improving women's access to productive resources, markets, and decision-making places. Nevertheless, nearly all economic programs I examined tend to treat women's participation as a social responsibility rather than an economic approach. Women are trained in traditionally "feminized" skills like tailoring or food processing without concurrent investments in enterprise development, financial

literacy, or market access. This strengthens gender stereotypes and bounds women's ability to contest in wider economic spheres.

Even though policy provisions and environment officially support women's economic empowerment, the implementation gap remains widespread. As the Constitution of Nepal (2015) guarantees women's right to participate in all scopes of development, including economic activities. Likewise, *the Local Government Operation Act, 2017* authorizes local bodies to design gender responsive economic programs, and national frameworks such as *the Fifteenth Periodic Plan (2019–2024)* and the *Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Strategy, 202,1* highlight women's entrepreneurship and livelihood advancement (Ministry of Federal Affairs & General Administration [MoFGA], 2021). Though, studies indicate that the majority of these programs are fragmented and lack incorporation with local market systems. For example, Timilsina (2024) found that local governments often allocate small budgets for women's training but fail to join these activities to cooperatives, private sector partnerships, or market chains.

Based on my understanding, the nonappearance of market-oriented strategies limits the economic earnings. Training without access to credit, technology, and market networks leaves women kept to low income or survival level activities. Participatory Development Theory highlights that empowerment necessity includes control over economic resources and value chains (Chambers, 1997), while GAD Theory contends that empowerment includes both access and control over creative assets (Moser, 1993). In this context, the lack of linkage between women's training programs and the broader economic system not only reduces the sustainability of interventions but also strengthens the gendered economic hierarchy where men dominate higher value markets and women remain confined to micro or small enterprises.

Consequently, I interpret this finding as evidence of a mechanical disconnect between policy intentions and institutional practices in promoting women's economic empowerment. While the policies of inclusion and gender equality exist, the institutional frameworks for enabling women's economic participation continue to be weak. To fulfill the gap in local development requirements to transfer to market-based initiative development, financial services, and post training support. Gender And Development theorists argue that empowerment needs converting structures that limit women's prospects, not just expanding their attendance inside current systems

(Kabeer, 2005). Similarly, from a participatory development standpoint, sustainable empowerment demands that women themselves describe their development priorities and lead the processes that link production with local and external markets. Only through such transformation can local economic development become both gender equitable and justifiable.

### **Evolving Awareness and Growing Agency among Women**

During my study, I found noticeable unfolding in women's self-awareness and sense of agency regarding their participation in local development activities. I understand this was not a sudden quick-fix or a newly acquired trait, but rather the manifestation of their inherent agency, an underlying capacity that began to reveal itself over their awareness in the local development activities. Many participants described how their understanding of development, rights, and development priorities had lengthened since their involvement in community meetings and local committees. However, barriers continue, women progressively claim on their legal rights to raise their voice. Women are seen as more enthusiastic to participate in development process to change their roles. This rising self-awareness shows significant way forward to change from passive reception to active participation.

Some participants stated that earlier they hesitated to speak in public forums or question male members in ward meetings. However, with continued experience to local development apparatus, periodic training, and reassurance from other women representatives, they began to express their understanding more confidently. One elected women member remarked that she now feels more capable of discussing budgeting and planning issues, even though she still lacks full administrative and technical understanding. This subtle but powerful transformation in women's perception of their own capabilities proves the gradual evolution of agency what Kabeer (1999) seeks the ability to define one's goals and act upon them.

Through the lens of Participatory Development Theory (PDT), this rising awareness brings into line with the principle that women's empowerment is both a process and an outcome of participation (Chambers, 1997; Cornwall, 2008). The participant's descriptions from my study show that while initial participation was often symbolic attending meetings without conducive engagement gradually built their self-confidence to articulate interpretations and influence decisions. This resonates with the idea that participation is transformative when it permits

marginalized women to gain not only access but also influence in the development process.

From the viewpoint of Gender and Development (GAD) Theory, women's developing agency represents a change from integration into development towards transformation through local development. GAD researchers such as Moser (1993) and Kabeer (2005) argue that women's empowerment occurs when gendered power relations are redefined, allowing women to claim voice, decision making authority, and control over development resources. In my study area, such unfolding appears in elusive but seems progressive ways. For example, women members are raising the voice about budget allocations for gender friendly development projects. They are challenging token participation, and demanding accountability for local development.

As perspective of policy provisions have played a supportive, however not yet adequate role in development this change. As mentioned above, the current constitutional and related policy and plan documents, provisions often face implementation challenges due to entrenched patriarchal attitudes, limited institutional support, and lack of gender sensitive development practices.

By the study findings, I understand that women's participation is not enough addressed by polices, it should be seen in practice. For this policy implementors should be aware of it. Furthermore, family and society need help for gender friendly practice. As women engage more frequently in local planning, budgeting, and monitoring activities, they gradually internalize a sense of ownership and capability.

To increase such momentum, local governments must move beyond token participation and create continued platforms for women's participation in development. Establishing women's access to information and communication technology must be important, building confidence through practical learning. As both theories suggest, the real measure of empowerment deceits not only in the presence of women in decision making spaces but in their growing ability to shape those places on their own standings.

In this study, I explored women's participation in the local development process within the framework of new federal governance. My study purpose was to explore how women experience and interpret their participation in local development process. Through in-depth interviews and interpretive analysis, I pursued to uncover not only what women do in official structures but also how they perceive their own role, influence, and restraints in shaping to local development.

From my findings, I understand clearly that policy commitment alone does not guarantee women's meaningful participation in practice. Although local governments officially support women's participatory development, these commitments are not fully realized in regular institutional practices. Women's involvement often seems to be in meeting minute books or attendance sheets rather than in decision making processes effectively. Such types of gaps between policy and practice align to the argument of the Theory of Participatory Development remind us that participation becomes meaningful only when people have real impact over decisions and control over outcomes. Similarly, from the Gender and Development (GAD) perspective, these findings highlight that women's empowerment cannot be achieved by simply introducing women into existing structures without challenging the underlying patriarchal norms, attitudes and practices power relations that shape those systems.

The analysis also presented that women's involvement remains largely symbolic rather than transformative. Even though policy provisions have ensured women's attendance in local development, their influence over planning, budgeting, and implementation is limited. Key decisions are often made informally by a few powerful men, which decreases women's role to conventionalism rather than company. It reflects a persistent form of tokenistic inclusion that gratifies policy requirements but does not bring meaningful changes. Considering GAD theory, such symbolic participation reveals how gendered authority relations continue to define leadership places, where women are included without being empowered to change the agenda.

Additionally, the study highlights that income generative programs lack sustainability and market linkages. Although several local training programs are conducted in the name of women's empowerment, many fail to generate sustainable income. Without proper marketing support, value chain connection, and institutional follow up, such programs remain temporary interventions. As I observed in multiple cases, the absence of market integration renders these efforts ineffective. This finding aligns with both Participatory Development Theory, which emphasizes community ownership and practical outcomes, and GAD theory, that stresses the need to convert financial relations that continue women's dependency.

Even with these structural limits, I also found an encouraging change in the structure of advancing understanding and rising action among women. The

participated women members presented increased self-confidence, awareness, and understanding regarding their rights of inclusion. Their voices reproduced a regular movement from inactive attendances to active engagement. This growing consciousness represents an encouraging sign that participatory development is not motionless but evolving through practice, learning, and collective reproduction. From a theoretical standpoint, this change resonates with the idea of participation as a process rather than a product one that emerges from women's continuous involvement, negotiation, and statement within local development process.

I conclude that women's participation in local development is moving through a transitional stage moving to progressive way. The legal and institutional structures have laid the foundation for gender inclusion, but the deeper transformation of governance culture is still in progress. The continuation of male-controlled norms, limited capacity enhancement, and lack of institutional supportive mechanisms remain to translate of policy into good practice. Whereas participation currently remains procedural, the growing awareness and agency of women members indicate that a transformative change is emerging gradually from within the institution. In my view, achieving genuine women inclusive and participatory local development requires a combination of structural, institutional, and behavioral improvements. There is a need to reinforce capacity development programs for women members especially in leadership, budgeting, negotiation, and policy examination. The application of Gender Responsive Budgeting should be seen as measurable outcomes rather than procedural presentation. Similarly, participatory planning mechanisms must be institutionalized to confirm that women's voices are not just heard but integrated into decisions and action orientated. Additionally, political system and administrative organizations must promote women's participation beyond token positions and address informal fences that confine their involvement.

## CHAPTER VII

### SUMMARY OF THE STUDY, CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

In this chapter I have summarized the overall thesis and conclusions of the study. The chapter outlines implications for graduating development studies students, universities and academic institutions, policymakers, and future researchers concerning entrepreneurial trajectories within the broader thesis context.

#### **Summary of the Study**

In this study, I explored how women experience and perceive their participation in local development activities, and what types of fences and enabling factors shape their engagement within the context of new federal governance system. The findings disclose that while women's attendance in local activities has significantly increased following current constitutional and legal system, their participation remains largely symbolic and limited in influence. Despite the government policy commitments to gender equality and social inclusion, the practice of women's meaningful participation continues to be hindered by socio cultural, institutional, and structural fences.

My analysis displays that policy commitment does not always translate into effective application. Local governments often adopt the rhetoric of inclusion but fail to integrate women friendly in planning, budgeting, and development implementation. Participation is frequently recorded in meeting registers but hardly replicated in decisions or results. Women representatives and community members express that their involvement often fulfills formal requirements rather than substantive empowerment, reflecting an interruption between policy intent and practice.

The findings additional indicate that women's attendance has improved numerically due to legally mandatory quota provisions, but real decision-making power remains concentrated among men leaders. This pattern aligns with what I interpret as the illusion of inclusion, where in the name of inclusion the women's participation exists without real transformation in power exercise. The theory of Participatory Development views regarding such types of gaps, as limiting true participation. The Lense of this theory seeks shared control, mutual accountability, and empowerment rather than symbolic presence.

Development priorities in local level government also replicate gender bias. My study found that physical infrastructural development projects such as roads making, and community buildings receive far greater attention and funding than programs aimed at capacity building, skill development, or economic development focusing to women. Activities targeted to women, such as short-term training, are often disconnected from market linkages, foremost to limited income generative and sustainability. This suggests that development planning continues to prioritize visible, male dominated projects over long-term human and social development outcomes.

Regarding the women's participation in development, it sounds good from legal perspective, but they hardly influence the decision-making process for local development. When women place their need-based development agenda such as skill-based training or income generative programs are often postponed in favor of infrastructural development by male leaders. It indicates a form of pseudo participation, where consultation arises but decision-making power continues centralized. Lack of proper education and proper training often put women deprived of the skills needed to participate in local development. These gaps intensified by insufficient access to timely information demoralize their self-confidence and limit their capability to contribute effectively to development activities. Insufficient capacity enhancement agendas, limited movement, and weak institutional support structures aggravate this problem. These practical restraints reinforce a system where women's presence in local development is noticeable, but their inspiration remains bordering. I understand that women's disempowerment is formed by numerous, intersecting fences, socio cultural norms, institutional prejudices, and educational limitations that reinforce each other.

The majority of the research participants raised the voice on their rights and responsibilities and a desire to move from inactive to active participation. Their reflections show resilience and willpower to right space in local development, gesturing a gradual change in social consciousness and local development culture. This study highlights on that attaining woman inclusive and participatory local development necessitates more than legal mandates to the practical. It demands systematic change, continued capacity building, institutional accountability, and modifications in social behavior. Women's participation must change from symbolic attendance to transformative engagement where they not only subjugate seats but also shape agendas, influence decisions making process for local development.

### **Conclusion of the Study**

My study of women's experience of participation in local development under new federal system discloses a critical inequality: while constitutional and legal reforms have achieved formal attendance for women, this inclusion has not yet translated into meaningful empowerment or substantive influence over outcomes in local development at local government. The descriptions collected show that participation is still harshly constrained by deep-rooted socio-cultural norms and official practices that preserve male supremacy. Women often fulfill policy quotas without safeguarding genuine power-sharing or control over resources and decision-making for development, confirming that participation lacking true authority remains tokenistic, as postulated by Participatory Development Theory.

Despite these systemic barriers, the research identifies inspiring signs of unfolding and rising agency among women members. However, they remain to face encounters like gender-biased development priorities and limited resources distribution, many are actively asserting their voices, enquiring against discriminatory practices, and proposing community-applicable agendas, suggesting a slow but meaningful change from dependency to possession. To sustain this progress and bridge the gap between policy and practice, substantive mechanisms are required. These incorporate comprehensive leadership development, women friendly budgeting, market-linked income generating programs, and official responsibility. Eventually, achieving genuine and transformative inclusion for women is essential not only for upholding equity and justice but also for consolidation democracy and inspiring local development within new federal governance system.

### **Implications of the Study**

The significant theoretical implications and conclusions drawn from this study can benefit graduating students, universities, academic institutions, developmental organizations, policy makers, development planners and implementers. Both structural barriers and the role of individuals in local development focusing gender balanced sustainable development empowering women participation. These concepts are presented in Participatory development theory and Gender and Development theory. The findings and insights of this study were drawn from live experience and perceptions of stakeholders' women's participant in the field of development through the local government, Rural Municipality.

### **Implications for Graduate Students of Development Studies and Related Field**

For graduating students of development studies and other related field, can use this research to look beyond textbooks regarding significance of understanding to the lived reality of women's participation in development processes. The study encourages graduate students of development studies to study in gender perspective at local governance and development. The findings help and suggest to students learning qualitative and interpretive methods to uncover concealed gender power dynamics.

### **Implication for Policymakers**

The findings underscore the gap between legal provisions and real practice, contribution critical direction for policymakers particularly at local levels government. By identifying structural and socio-cultural fences to women's participation, the study recommends that policy interventions should go beyond quantitative attendance and emphasis on capacity enhancement activities, awareness making programs. The study implies that current legal frameworks, while progressive, are being used as procedural checklists rather than transformative tools. Policy makers can transfer beyond mandating quotas and begin institutionalizing accountability mechanisms. This includes creating formal reporting structures for women representatives who are excluded from strategic planning and ensuring that Gender Responsive Budgeting (GRB) is linked to quantifiable women friendly outcomes that helps for gender balanced and sustainable development framework, rather than just being categorized as gender-responsive on paper.

### **For Academic Institutions**

Universities and academic institutions can use these findings and insights to refine curricula in development studies, public administration, and gender studies. Academic Organizations involved in local development initiatives may also benefit from understanding the socio cultural and institutional dynamics that influence women's participation, enabling them to design women's participative programs and interventions. Moreover, curriculum development may integrate about power analysis to help future scholars understand how socio-cultural barriers and patriarchal norms actively undermine institutional policies in regards of women participation in local development

### **Pedagogical Dividend and Rationalized Implications**

I believe the pedagogical dividend of my research lies in its shift away from a "banking model" of development education, where legal provisions and policy

guidelines are simply handed down to the local level, toward a more transformative way of learning. My study will facilitate the creation of a progressive curriculum of moving forward from the patriarchal model to that deeply embedded in local governance (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1983). By moving beyond basic technical knowledge to a deeper "critical consciousness," I want to help students and scholars at Kathmandu University understand that simply having women in the room (inclusion) is not the same as giving them real power. Through this work, I aim to turn the classroom into a space for social justice, where research is not just about collecting data but about creating shared meaning and helping future development workers reflect on their own roles (Mezirow, 1991; Miller & Seller, 1985).

To apply this in our educational system, I offer this dissertation as a roadmap for connecting high-level constitutional laws with the actual daily lives of women. I believe the School of Education can educate graduates to become transformative managers and development facilitators who want to facilitate meaningful participatory development in local governance. This study can contribute; academic institutions may implement research-based knowledge that connects the lived experiences of the associated development women participants. For example, looking at how educational and information-bearing effects might help students grasp tokenism in a real-world way, not just in theory. By incorporating this knowledge into development administration lessons, universities can promote a pedagogy that efficiently equips students to pull down the continuum of disempowerment in their approaching professional activities.

### **Implication for Development Planners and Implementers**

Development planners and Implementer must challenge the systemic gender bias that prioritizes physical infrastructure over human and social development. The findings suggest that soft programs like leadership training and skill enhancement should be treated as essential development infrastructure. High significantly, economic empowerment programs must be redesigned to include market linkages and value chain connections; without these, short-term trainings in changed skills will continue to fail in creating sustainable financial independence for women.

### **Final Reflections**

Reflecting on the journey from identifying the research problem to the conclusion of this study, I understand a profound sense of achievement in detailing the complications of women's participation in local development. As an MPhil student in

Development Studies, my goal was to transfer beyond nonconcrete academic queries and involve straight with the lived experiences of stakeholder women whose voices are often sidelined. This interpretive inquiry exposed a tenacious and critical gap between current legal contexts, such as the 2015 Constitution and the Local Government Operation Act, and their real application on the ground. The findings of this study disclose that although women have attained but that limited in legally mandatory presents remains mainly procedural and symbolic. It is seen that relegated to pseudo-participation where they are invited to meetings to fulfill formalities but are excluded from strategic decision-making and resource control system.

My research discloses how deeply entrenched male-controlled standards, socio-cultural barriers, and institutional discrepancies converge to confirm that practical women's involvement remains a determined encounter. I perceived how development priorities continue to reproduce a gender biasness, prioritizing physical infrastructural development activities over the capacity-building and economic empowerment agendas that women members truly propose. Additionally, the study highlighted that current economic initiatives every so often lack the bazaar connections and sustainability required for sincere unconventionality. Nevertheless, interacting methodically with research participants also permitted me to document inspiring symbols of unfolding; I perceived a gradual but positive attendance of awareness and agency as women transfer from passive attendance toward better involvement.

This study has strengthened my academic skills in qualitative analysis and philosophical knowledge. It has enhanced my capacity consolidating the value of listening strongly and preserving understanding to subjects of power and impartiality. It has been presented that documenting these positions is an energetic contribution to both theoretical knowledge and the broader development discourse. Finally, this study has been both motivating and valuable, defining my proficient perspective and consolidating my declaration of inclusive and participatory development in local governance. I accomplish this work with a transformed devotion to connecting the gap between policy determined and lived understanding, resounding frontward the understanding that factual empowerment necessitates shifting from procedural compliance to a practice where women have equal power to shape development on their own terms.

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## ANNEXES

### Interview Guidelines

#### Section I

RQ 1: How do women perceive and experience their participation in local development processes?

How do you understand the development process?

- Understanding development (understanding infrastructure, human and social development in inclusive perspective), and their perception on women's participation in development process.
- Knowledge of development processes (*Appraisal, planning steps (prioritization-finalize with budgeting, implementation, monitoring/evaluation, benefit sharing and review)*)
- Experiences/observation on performance of activities carried out by users' committees: I) women inclusive (general) ii) women lead iii) women only (all members)
- Knowledge on current policy provision for women's targeted development and (explore the gap in policy and practice, perception on current legal provisions) and their experience. Understanding the procedures for implementing developmental projects with local user committees (formation, inclusion, roles, and responsibilities of user's committees).
- Changes in women's participation after established elected local government.

#### Section-II

RQ 2: How do women understand the major barriers that limit their meaningful participation in the local development process?

1. Can you tell me about the major barriers affecting on meaningful participation of women in development process?
2. Based on your experience, (in general) people think women's involvement in development process? (value, acceptance, ...)

3. How do women perceive themselves in participating development activities? (self-efficacy: think, act, feel)
4. What is the status of the workload for women in your society?
5. How do get societal /and family support for women to participate in development activities?
6. How do you see the condition of women's access, control and utilization of economic resources?
7. What is the status of women's education? (in general: illiterate, literate, up to high school level, and more)
8. How does affect education to women in participating development process?
9. Do you have any questions and suggestions?

Thank you for your active participation and providing valuable information.