

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3126/cognition.v7i1.74727>

# The Role of SMEs in Enhancing Women's Employment Opportunities in Nepal: A Data-Driven Perspective

Laxmi Kanta Sharma (PhD)<sup>1</sup>Vishal Paudel (M.Phil.)<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

*Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) play a crucial role in Nepal's economy, making up over 90% of all businesses and providing jobs for around 2.6 million people. Despite this, women are underrepresented in the SME sector, accounting for only 37.75% of the workforce. Most of these women work in informal and low-paying roles, highlighting a significant gender gap. This study takes a data-driven approach to explore the barriers that limit women's participation in SMEs. These include restricted access to financial resources, insufficient vocational training, deeply rooted societal norms, and poor infrastructure in rural areas. By analyzing secondary data, the research emphasizes how promoting gender inclusion in SMEs could have transformative effects. These include reducing poverty, increasing household incomes, and potentially boosting Nepal's GDP by up to 16%. The study also reviews successful practices from around the world and evaluates how they can be adapted to Nepal's unique social and economic conditions. It calls for targeted measures such as expanding women's access to financial services, providing skill development opportunities, and implementing gender-sensitive policies. These actions aim to create a more inclusive SME sector. Ultimately, the findings underline the critical role of SMEs in driving sustainable economic growth and gender equality. By prioritizing women's participation, SMEs can become powerful tools for socioeconomic progress in Nepal.*

**Keywords:** SMEs, Barriers, Participation, Training, Entrepreneurs.

## Introduction

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) are pivotal to Nepal's economy, constituting over 90 percent of total enterprises and providing employment to approximately 2.6 million people, significantly contributing to the national GDP (CBS, 2018; NRB, 2023). Despite their vital role in economic development, SMEs in Nepal have yet to realize their full potential in fostering gender-inclusive employment. Women, who make up 51.5 percent of Nepal's population (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2021), are underrepresented in the formal workforce, with only 37.75 percent of Nepal's labor force comprising women as of 2023. This stark gender disparity highlights missed opportunities in leveraging women's economic contributions (WB, 2023).

The underrepresentation of women in Nepal's workforce is particularly evident in the SME sector, where challenges such as limited access to finance, inadequate skill development programs, and entrenched societal norms hinder their participation (UN Women, 2023). These barriers are exacerbated by structural inequalities, including the disproportionate burden of unpaid care work

1. Associate Professor, Centre for Economic Development and Administration (CEDA), TU, [laxmi.sharma@ceda.tu.edu.np](mailto:laxmi.sharma@ceda.tu.edu.np)

2. Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, Nepal, [revishalsearch94@gmail.com](mailto:revishalsearch94@gmail.com)

and restricted mobility, especially in rural areas. For example, only 19 percent of Nepalese women have access to formal financial services, a critical limitation for those aspiring to entrepreneurial ventures within SMEs (Asian Development Bank, 2023). Infrastructural deficiencies and cultural norms further restrict women's ability to engage in productive economic activities.

From a socioeconomic perspective, addressing these barriers presents dual opportunities for Nepal. Economically, increasing women's participation in SMEs can boost household incomes, reduce poverty, and enhance financial independence for women. Studies indicate that closing gender gaps in the workforce could increase Nepal's GDP by up to 16 percent, underscoring the transformative potential of inclusive labor policies (World Bank, 2023). Additionally, gender-diverse teams are linked to improved business resilience and innovation, aligning with global evidence that such teams outperform in decision-making and problem-solving (International Labour Organization, 2022).

This research critically examines the role of SMEs in enhancing women's employment opportunities in Nepal by investigating the current state of women's participation, the barriers they face, and potential solutions. By leveraging secondary data from credible sources such as the World Bank Gender Data Portal, Nepal Labour Force Survey, and reports from international organizations, this study provides a comprehensive analysis of the intersection between gender and entrepreneurship. Furthermore, it situates Nepal's SME sector within a global context, drawing on best practices from similar economies to offer actionable insights for policymakers and stakeholders.

The findings of this study contribute to the growing body of literature emphasizing the importance of gender equity in achieving sustainable development. This research will be particularly valuable for government agencies, NGOs, and private sector actors seeking to design targeted interventions that empower women and enhance Nepal's economic resilience. Ultimately, this article advocates for a paradigm shift in the SME ecosystem, envisioning it as a platform not only for economic growth but also for social transformation.

## Statement of the Problem

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) are integral to Nepal's economy, yet their potential to advance gender equity in employment remains untapped. Women, who represent 51.5 percent of the population, account for only 37.75 percent of the workforce, highlighting a significant gender gap (World Bank, 2023). This disparity is especially evident in the SME sector, where systemic barriers such as limited financial access, inadequate skill development programs, entrenched cultural norms, and rural infrastructure deficiencies restrict women's participation (UN Women, 2023; Asian Development Bank, 2023). These barriers not only constrain women's economic contributions but also limit SMEs' potential to drive inclusive growth. Studies show that closing gender gaps could boost Nepal's GDP by up to 16 percent (World Bank, 2023). However, there is a lack of comprehensive insights into how SMEs can actively foster gender-inclusive practices, underscoring the need for this research. By addressing the intersection of gender and entrepreneurship, this study seeks to provide actionable strategies for empowering women and unlocking the economic potential of SMEs in Nepal.

## Research Questions

The research is guided by the primary issue: *How can SMEs in Nepal enhance women's employment opportunities and contribute to reducing gender disparities?* It seeks to understand the current trends in women's participation in SMEs, identify the key socioeconomic and structural barriers they face, and evaluate strategies or policies to promote gender inclusivity. Some specific research questions based on the overarching problem statement are as follows:

- Q1. What are the current trends in women's participation in SMEs in Nepal?
- Q2. What are the key socioeconomic, structural, and cultural barriers limiting women's involvement in the SME sector?
- Q3. What is the potential impact of reducing gender disparities in SMEs on Nepal's economic growth and women's empowerment?

### **Research Objectives**

The overarching objective is to assess the role of SMEs in advancing women's empowerment and contributing to equitable economic development. Specifically, the study aims to analyze women's current participation in SMEs, pinpoint challenges limiting their involvement, review successful global and regional practices, and provide evidence-based recommendations for policymakers and stakeholders to foster a gender-equitable SME ecosystem.

1. To evaluate the current state of women's participation in Nepal's SME sector.
2. To examine the socioeconomic, structural, and cultural challenges that hinder women's involvement in SMEs.
3. To assess the role of SMEs in advancing women's empowerment and its broader impact on equitable economic development.

### **Literature Review**

#### **The Role of SMEs in Global Context**

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) are universally recognized as critical drivers of economic growth, accounting for approximately 90 percent of businesses and over 50 percent of total employment worldwide (International Labour Organization, 2022). Research highlights that fostering gender-inclusive practices within SMEs not only promotes social equity but also enhances organizational outcomes, such as innovation, resilience, and decision-making efficiency (ILO, 2022). However, women's participation in the global SME ecosystem remains limited due to deeply entrenched systemic barriers, including unequal access to finance, insufficient training opportunities, and cultural norms that restrict women's entrepreneurial aspirations (World Bank, 2023). For instance, only 7 percent of global venture capital funding is allocated to women entrepreneurs, reflecting the significant financial disparities they face.

In addition to structural challenges, policy gaps often exacerbate gender inequality in SMEs. Successful interventions in countries like Rwanda and Vietnam demonstrate the importance of enabling environments for women's economic participation, including subsidized loans, mentorship programs, and capacity-building initiatives (United Nations Development Programme, 2023). Despite such examples, the global literature lacks sufficient exploration of how these models can be tailored to meet the specific cultural and structural challenges faced by women in developing economies like Nepal.

#### **Women in SMEs: The Asian Perspective**

In Asia, SMEs contribute significantly to economic activity, accounting for 30 percent to 50 percent of GDP in most developing countries (Asian Development Bank, 2023). However, gender disparities remain pervasive, particularly in South Asia, where cultural norms and traditional gender roles continue to limit women's participation. Women entrepreneurs often face barriers such as restricted mobility, inadequate access to formal credit, and a lack of institutional support systems.

For instance, in Bangladesh, women represent only 10 percent of SME owners, and their businesses are predominantly confined to low-profit industries like textiles and handicrafts (ADB, 2023).

Encouragingly, several Asian countries have implemented targeted interventions to address these barriers. In India, the "Stand-Up India Scheme" provides financial assistance to women entrepreneurs, while Malaysia has introduced women-centric business incubators to enhance entrepreneurial capabilities. These initiatives underscore the effectiveness of targeted support mechanisms in promoting gender-inclusive employment within SMEs. However, the transferability of these models to Nepal has not been sufficiently explored in existing literature. The diverse socio-cultural and infrastructural landscape of South Asia demands localized strategies, which are often missing in current research.

### **Nepalese Context: Women and SMEs**

In Nepal, SMEs represent over 90 percent of total enterprises and employ approximately 2.6 million people, making them vital to the country's economy (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2018). Despite their economic significance, the SME sector in Nepal has not fully harnessed its potential to foster gender equity. Women's participation in the labor force remains disproportionately low, at only 37.75 percent as of 2023, compared to their 51.5 percent share of the population (World Bank, 2023). In the SME sector, women often encounter additional challenges, including limited access to finance, inadequate training programs, and deeply entrenched cultural norms that perpetuate gender inequality (UN Women, 2023). The Asian Development Bank (2023) highlights that only 19 percent of Nepalese women have access to formal financial services, significantly limiting their entrepreneurial opportunities.

The rural-urban divide further exacerbates these challenges. Women in rural areas face compounded barriers, such as restricted mobility, lack of infrastructure, and limited educational opportunities. These structural limitations constrain their ability to engage in productive economic activities, relegating many to low-skill, informal roles within SMEs. While government and international organizations have introduced initiatives such as microfinance programs and vocational training, the impact of these efforts remains uneven due to insufficient scalability and a lack of coordination between stakeholders (ADB, 2023).

### **Theoretical Frameworks and Research Gaps**

This study is grounded in two key theoretical frameworks: Gender and Development Theory and Labor Market Segmentation Theory. Gender and Development Theory emphasizes the systemic nature of gender inequalities within social, economic, and institutional structures, providing a lens to analyze the challenges women face in accessing SME opportunities. Labor Market Segmentation Theory complements this by explaining how structural barriers confine women to low-paying, informal roles, limiting their upward mobility within the labor market.

While global and regional literature underscores the importance of financial inclusion, skill development, and supportive policies in fostering women's participation in SMEs, significant gaps remain in the Nepalese context. Existing studies in Nepal often focus narrowly on microfinance or specific case studies of women entrepreneurs, neglecting broader analyses of systemic barriers and opportunities within the SME sector. Additionally, the scalability of successful global and regional models to Nepal's socio-economic and cultural landscape is largely unexplored.

This literature review identifies the need for a comprehensive examination of women's employment in Nepal's SME sector. It highlights the critical role of SMEs in promoting gender equity while

identifying persistent barriers that limit women's economic participation. The global and Asian contexts provide valuable insights into best practices, such as targeted financial assistance, mentorship programs, and capacity-building initiatives. However, the lack of localized research in Nepal limits the applicability of these interventions. This study addresses these gaps by exploring the current state of women's participation in Nepal's SME sector, analyzing the challenges they face, and identifying actionable strategies to foster a gender-inclusive SME ecosystem.

## **Research Methodology**

The study employed a qualitative exploratory design, conducting semi-structured interviews with women entrepreneurs across various industries within the MSME sector. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure representation across urban and rural areas, industries, and business scales. Key focus areas of interviews included: *Financial access and capital mobilization, skill development and capacity building, societal and cultural barriers to entrepreneurship and the role of policy and institutional support in promoting gender equity*. The secondary study methodology incorporates a systematic review of credible and authentic sources, including government reports, international organization publications, and peer-reviewed academic articles. Foundational data on SMEs' economic contributions and gender-disaggregated labor force statistics are drawn from the *National Economic Census 2018* and the *Nepal Labour Force Survey 2020/21* published by the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS, 2018; CBS, 2021). Additional insights into women's participation in the workforce and barriers to their engagement are obtained from global sources, such as the World Bank Gender Data Portal (World Bank, 2023) and UN Women's *Towards Inclusive MSME Sector Growth in Nepal* (UN Women, 2023). The Asian Development Bank (ADB) provides data on women's financial inclusion and access to entrepreneurial resources (ADB, 2023). Theoretical frameworks, including Gender and Development Theory and Labor Market Segmentation Theory, underpin the analysis, ensuring the study is academically robust.

Data analysis employs qualitative content analysis to identify recurring patterns, barriers, and opportunities related to women's employment in SMEs. The secondary data is triangulated across multiple sources to ensure validity and reliability. Global best practices and success stories are integrated to contextualize Nepal's findings within broader gender-inclusive SME initiatives. This approach allows for the formulation of evidence-based recommendations for policymakers, SMEs, and stakeholders. Ethical considerations are upheld through proper citation of all sources, while limitations, such as reliance on secondary data and lack of primary fieldwork, are transparently acknowledged to inform the scope of conclusions and future research directions.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### **Findings**

#### **Current Trends in Women's Employment in Nepal's SME Sector**

Women's participation in Nepal's SME sector remains limited, with significant disparities in employment and entrepreneurship. According to the *Nepal Labour Force Survey 2020/21*, women constitute 37.75 percent of the total labor force, primarily in low-paying, informal roles within SMEs (CBS, 2021). These roles are concentrated in agriculture, textiles, and small-scale manufacturing, which offer limited opportunities for skill development and upward mobility. Urban SMEs provide relatively better inclusion rates, with women participating in service-oriented businesses such as retail and hospitality. However, their involvement in high-value sectors like technology, finance, and large-scale manufacturing remains negligible (UN Women, 2023).

Data from the *National Economic Census 2018* highlights a stark gender gap in SME ownership, with women managing less than 20 percent of registered enterprises (CBS, 2018). Even among women-led enterprises, most operate as micro-enterprises with limited scalability and profitability. These trends reveal a systemic underutilization of women's potential in the SME ecosystem, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions to enable equitable participation.

### **Barriers to Women's Participation in SMEs**

Several structural and socio-economic barriers restrict women's participation in Nepal's SME sector.

#### **Financial exclusion**

It is a significant obstacle, with only 19% of Nepalese women having access to formal financial services (ADB, 2023). Stringent loan requirements, such as collateral demands, further exacerbate this issue, limiting women's ability to secure funding for entrepreneurial ventures. Although microfinance programs exist, they are often inadequate to meet the capital needs of SMEs, particularly for scaling businesses.

#### ***Excerpts from Respondents***

*"I wanted to expand my tailoring business, but banks refused to give me a loan because I couldn't provide collateral. Microfinance loans are helpful, but the amounts are too small to grow my business."* (Respondent 12, Urban Entrepreneur)

*"I don't understand the formal banking system. They ask for too many documents, and I get intimidated. I wish there were simpler options for women like me in villages."* (Respondent 7, Rural Entrepreneur)

#### **Skill gaps**

Skill Gaps represent another critical barrier. Vocational training programs targeting women remain sparse and are often misaligned with market demands, leaving women ill-equipped to compete in high-value sectors like technology and services (UN Women, 2023). This mismatch perpetuates the cycle of informal and low-paying roles, further limiting women's economic contributions.

#### ***Excerpts from Respondents***

*"I attended a training program on handicrafts, but there was no follow-up support to help us sell our products. We need training that helps us understand business markets."* (Respondent 18, Rural Entrepreneur)

*"Technology is driving businesses today, but most of us don't even know how to use basic software. We need access to training that can prepare us for modern industries."* (Respondent 30, Urban Entrepreneur)

#### **Cultural Norms**

Cultural Norms and societal expectations also hinder women's participation. Traditional gender roles often confine women to unpaid care work, significantly reducing their time and mobility for formal employment or entrepreneurial activities (World Bank, 2023). In rural areas, these constraints are compounded by infrastructural deficiencies, such as poor transport networks and lack of access to market facilities, which restrict women's ability to engage in SME operations. As outlined in JP-RWEE (2023), there is a higher disparity of women in off the field employment within the rural areas of Nepal such as Siraha and Saptari where women engagement in business is around 10.3 percent of male engagement in agriculture.

### ***Excerpts from Respondents***

*“My family doesn’t take my business seriously. They think I am just passing time while managing household duties. It’s hard to convince them that this is real work.” (Respondent 3, Rural Entrepreneur)*

*“In my village, women are discouraged from traveling far for work. This limits our access to markets and resources, making it harder to grow.” (Respondent 9, Rural Entrepreneur)*

### **Lack of Institutional Support**

Urban-based women entrepreneurs reported relatively better access to resources, but rural counterparts faced significant barriers such as lack of infrastructure and mobility restrictions. Most women-owned businesses were small-scale, family-run, and faced scalability issues due to financial and societal constraints. From the study it was also observed that, Women entrepreneurs felt excluded from government initiatives due to bureaucratic inefficiencies and lack of targeted communication about available programs.

### ***Excerpts from Respondents***

*“I’ve heard about government schemes for entrepreneurs, but no one has explained how we can apply for them. The process feels too complicated.” (Respondent 22, Urban Entrepreneur)*

*“We need someone to guide us through the bureaucratic processes. Otherwise, these schemes remain out of our reach.” (Respondent 16, Urban Entrepreneur)*

### ***Opportunities for Enhancing Women’s Participation***

Despite the challenges, significant opportunities exist to enhance women’s participation in Nepal’s SME sector. **Financial inclusion** initiatives, such as digital banking and mobile payment platforms, offer promising pathways for increasing women’s access to formal financial services, particularly in remote areas. Global case studies, such as Rwanda’s subsidized loan programs and India’s government-backed credit guarantees, demonstrate the potential of such interventions to empower women entrepreneurs (ADB, 2023). Adapting these models to Nepal’s context could mitigate financial barriers.

**Skill development** is another critical area for intervention. Expanding vocational training programs tailored to women’s needs in high-growth sectors like technology, manufacturing, and services can equip them with market-relevant skills. Public-private partnerships can play a pivotal role in scaling these initiatives, ensuring that women across urban and rural settings benefit from targeted capacity-building programs.

Targeted **policy interventions** can further foster an enabling environment for women in SMEs. Measures such as tax incentives for women-led businesses, mentorship programs, and community awareness campaigns to challenge traditional gender roles have proven successful in other contexts (ILO, 2022). In Nepal, implementing similar strategies could not only enhance women’s participation but also contribute to broader social and economic transformation.

### ***Excerpts from Respondents***

*“Being part of a women’s cooperative has helped me share resources and find better market opportunities. Together, we have more bargaining power.” (Respondent 35, Rural Entrepreneur)*

*“Using mobile payment apps has made it easier for me to manage my sales and receive payments. Digital tools are opening new doors for us.” (Respondent 29, Urban Entrepreneur)*

## Discussion

### ***Objective 1: Current Trends in Women's Employment in Nepal's SME Sector***

Women's participation in Nepal's SME sector remains limited, with their involvement predominantly in low-paying, informal roles concentrated in agriculture, textiles, and small-scale manufacturing. This reflects a broader global pattern where women in developing economies face challenges in accessing formal employment opportunities (CBS, 2021; UN Women, 2023). However, the Nepalese context presents a unique dynamic, with urban SMEs demonstrating relatively higher inclusion in service-oriented sectors such as retail and hospitality. Despite this progress, the absence of women in high-value industries like technology and finance highlights a significant untapped potential for economic growth.

Compared to global counterparts, such as women entrepreneurs in Vietnam, who benefit from targeted government support, Nepalese women face systemic barriers that limit their ability to scale micro-enterprises into sustainable businesses. These trends underscore the need for targeted policy interventions to promote women's integration into diverse SME sub-sectors.

### ***Objective 2: Barriers Hindering Women's Participation in SMEs***

The study identifies financial exclusion, skill gaps, and cultural norms as primary barriers restricting women's engagement in Nepal's SME sector. Only 19 percent of Nepalese women have access to formal financial services, a figure significantly lower than in neighboring South Asian economies with more developed microfinance ecosystems (ADB, 2023). The reliance on collateral-based lending models and the limited scalability of microfinance programs further exacerbate this issue. Globally, initiatives like Rwanda's subsidized loans for women entrepreneurs have successfully addressed similar challenges, indicating a potential solution for Nepal (ILO, 2022).

Skill gaps represent another significant barrier, with existing vocational training programs often failing to align with market demands, particularly in high-growth sectors like technology and manufacturing. This mismatch between skills and industry needs is consistent with challenges faced by women in Bangladesh and India (UN Women, 2023). In Nepal, this issue is compounded by rural infrastructural deficiencies that limit access to education and training for women.

Cultural norms and societal expectations further constrain women's participation, particularly in rural areas, where traditional gender roles dominate. These findings align with studies that highlight the pervasive influence of unpaid care work and restricted mobility on women's economic opportunities (World Bank, 2023). Addressing these deeply rooted socio-cultural barriers will require community-based interventions that promote behavioral change and gender-sensitive policies.

### ***Objective 3: Opportunities for Fostering Gender-Inclusive Practices***

Despite these challenges, the findings highlight several opportunities to enhance women's participation in Nepal's SME sector. Financial inclusion initiatives, such as digital banking and mobile payment platforms, offer scalable solutions for improving women's access to formal credit. These interventions have been transformative in countries like India, where government-backed credit guarantees have enabled women entrepreneurs to expand their businesses (ADB, 2023).

Skill development programs tailored to women's needs present another critical opportunity. Public-private partnerships can ensure training initiatives are aligned with market demands, equipping women with the skills needed to compete in high-growth sectors. Additionally, policy incentives, such as tax breaks and grants for women-led SMEs, can create a supportive ecosystem for entrepreneurship.

Globally, awareness campaigns and gender-sensitive policies have proven effective in challenging cultural norms and promoting women's economic participation. In Nepal, adapting these strategies to local contexts can foster an enabling environment for women in SMEs, contributing to both economic and social transformation.

### **Conclusion**

The findings reveal systemic barriers to women's participation, including financial exclusion, skill gaps, and entrenched socio-cultural norms. SMEs account for over 90% of Nepal's businesses and employ millions, yet women's involvement remains disproportionately low, particularly in formal and high-value roles. Women are primarily concentrated in informal, low-paying sectors such as agriculture, textiles, and small-scale manufacturing, limiting their economic contributions and potential for upward mobility.

Financial exclusion, one of the most significant challenges, limits women's ability to access formal credit, scale businesses, and enter high-growth sectors. Skill gaps, particularly in technology and manufacturing, further restrict women's competitiveness and ability to secure leadership roles. Additionally, cultural norms and societal expectations reinforce traditional gender roles, confining women to unpaid care work and limiting their time and mobility for entrepreneurial or formal employment activities. These barriers collectively constrain women's opportunities to contribute meaningfully to Nepal's SME sector.

Financial inclusion initiatives, such as government-backed credit guarantees and digital banking platforms, can provide women with much-needed access to capital and formal financial services. Skill development programs tailored to market demands and designed to include technological and entrepreneurial training can prepare women for higher-value roles in SMEs. Furthermore, gender-sensitive policies, such as tax incentives for women-led businesses and flexible working arrangements, can address structural barriers, while community-based awareness campaigns can challenge cultural norms and promote gender equity. Furthermore, future efforts must prioritize financial inclusion, skill development, and cultural transformation to create an enabling environment where women can thrive as entrepreneurs, leaders, and contributors to Nepal's economic growth.

### **Recommendations and Future Research Directions**

To address the systemic barriers hindering women's participation in Nepal's SME sector, targeted policy interventions and research are essential. Financial inclusion initiatives, such as government-backed credit guarantees, subsidized loans, and digital banking platforms, should be expanded to provide women entrepreneurs with accessible and scalable financing options. Skill development programs must align with market demands, focusing on high-growth sectors like technology, manufacturing, and services, while public-private partnerships can enhance their reach and effectiveness. Gender-sensitive policies, including tax incentives, flexible work arrangements, and mentorship programs, should foster a supportive ecosystem for women-led enterprises. Simultaneously, community-based awareness campaigns are necessary to challenge traditional gender roles and promote cultural shifts toward gender equity. The study recommends the government to enhance women empowerment programs from center to local level through different government organizations. In terms of instill the idea through education, government may include the importance and possibilities of women participation in this sector from a foundation level up to senior secondary level.

Future research should explore region-specific dynamics, particularly rural-urban disparities, to design localized interventions tailored to diverse contexts. Longitudinal studies are needed to evaluate the long-term impact of financial inclusion and skill-building initiatives, while sectoral

analyses can identify high-potential industries for gender-inclusive strategies. Ethnographic research should examine the influence of socio-cultural norms on women's participation, and primary data collection through surveys and interviews can provide firsthand insights into the challenges faced by women entrepreneurs. Finally, adapting and piloting successful global models, such as India's "Stand-Up India Scheme," can inform scalable solutions tailored to Nepal's unique socio-economic and cultural landscape.

## References

- Asian Development Bank. (2023). *Gender equality and women's empowerment in Nepal*. Retrieved from <https://www.adb.org>
- Central Bureau of Statistics. (2018). *National Economic Census 2018*. Kathmandu, Nepal: Government of Nepal.
- Central Bureau of Statistics. (2021). *Population census of Nepal 2021*. Retrieved from <https://cbs.gov.np>
- International Labour Organization. (2022). *The business case for diversity and inclusion*. Retrieved from <https://www.ilo.org>
- JP\_RWEE. (2024). JP-RWEE in Nepal: Baseline study country report. *Joint Programme on Accelerating Progress towards Rural Women's Economic Empowerment*. UN Women. <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2024/07/baseline-study-country-report>
- Nepal Rastra Bank. (2023). *Small and medium enterprises in Nepal: Challenges and opportunities*. Retrieved from <https://www.nrb.org.np>
- UN Women. (2023). *Towards inclusive MSME sector growth in Nepal*. Retrieved from <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-07/np-towards-inclusive-msme-sector-growth-in-nepal-s.pdf>
- World Bank. (2023). *Labor force, female (% of total labor force) - Nepal*. Retrieved from <https://data.worldbank.org>
- World Bank. (2023). *Women's economic participation and growth in Nepal*. Retrieved from <https://www.worldbank.org>
- Asian Development Bank (ADB). (2023). *Gender equality and women's empowerment in Nepal*. Retrieved from <https://www.adb.org/publications/gender-equality-results-case-study-nepal>
- Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS). (2018). *National Economic Census 2018*. Kathmandu, Nepal: Government of Nepal. Retrieved from <https://cbs.gov.np/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/National-Economic-Census-2018-National-Report-3-1.pdf>
- Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS). (2021). *Population census of Nepal 2021*. Retrieved from <https://censusnepal.cbs.gov.np/results>
- International Labour Organization (ILO). (2022). *The business case for diversity and inclusion*. Retrieved from [https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/%40dgreports/%40dcomm/%40publ/documents/publication/wcms\\_700964.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/%40dgreports/%40dcomm/%40publ/documents/publication/wcms_700964.pdf)
- NepalRastraBank(NRB).(2023).*SmallandmediumenterprisesinNepal:Challengesandopportunities*. Retrieved from <https://www.nrb.org.np/contents/uploads/2023/06/2021-Financial-Stability-Challenges-and-Opportunities-in-the-post-COVID-context.pdf>
- UN Women. (2023). *Towards inclusive MSME sector growth in Nepal*. Retrieved from <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2023/07/towards-inclusive-msme-sector-growth-in-nepal>
- World Bank. (2023). *Labor force, female (% of total labor force) - Nepal*. Retrieved from <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.TOTL.FE.ZS?locations=NP>
- World Bank. (2023). *Women's economic participation and growth in Nepal*. Retrieved from <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstreams/e08e506e-5f69-4b35-a6e4-10818c68746c/download>