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Understanding Gender and Provincial Disparities in Labour Force Participation and Employment Patterns in Nepal

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Abstract

This study explores age, gender and provincial differences in labour market outcomes in Nepal with the objective of analyzing the socio-economic determinants of employment and labour force population. These differences are essential to grasp for equal employment opportunity policies and solving workforce issues. Descriptive analysis, analyses of variance (ANOVA) and regression models are employed to measure inequities using data extracted from the Nepal living standard survey 2022/23. Studies reveal employment levels for the 25-44 and 45-64 age groups and reveal poor outcomes for the youth (15-24) and elderly (65+). Currently, young people remain unemployed at a rate of 22.7 percent with low people being engaged in the labour force. Sudurpaschim region's labour force participation rate is 44.9 percent and negative unemployment rate while in Karnali it is 44.8 percent and Karnali has a slightly higher unemployment rate. The labour in the current society remains gender segregated with women being engaged more in unpaid work in the domestic and farming activities while men are engaged in paid activities in the non-farming activities. Of policy implications, the type of views is advocacy in matters to do with unemployment particularly the youth, regional economics, and gender through education and vocational training. The given figure shows the distribution of investment across different advantaged provinces where special efforts are needed to address the employment disparities and integrate more populace in Nepal. Therefore, this study yields wonderful insights for future policy-based intervention within the labour market.

***Keywords*:** Gender inequality, labour market, participation rates, regional disparities

Introduction

The gender and regional disparity still prevail in job market segmentation in Nepal as a result of historical and persisting societal, economic and cultural discrimination. Still, women's employment, considering the numerous policy measures boosting financial inclusiveness is still low compared to men's (Sharma & Bista, 2025). This paper establishes that factors that hinder female employees include: education restriction, other facilities such as childcare and cultural barriers (ILO, 2022; UN Women, 2011). Employment opportunities are not equal across provinces, which shows how place matters, geography, infrastructure, and access to resources influence employment opportunities for young people differently (CBS, 2021; World Bank, 2023). Despite these problems existing in developed and developing nations including Nepal currently available literature lacks cutting-edge work that deals with these two dimensions of employment more systematically leaving major research gaps in the Nepalese employment context.

However, the problems of regional inequality do not disappear; gender has been another sort of barrier. Some of the issues include state underdevelopment, low rates of access to non-farm employment, and socio-economic exclusion in the provinces of Madhesh and Karnali (World Bank, 2023). On the other hand, areas such as the Bagmati and Lumbini zones have advantages in urbanization and infrastructure, which enlarges the variety of employment accessibility. These regional unfair inequalities form the basis of this paper's proposal for conducting sex and geographic analysis to consider gender and regional relationships in the labor market imperfections.

Thus, this paper seeks to establish that employment patterns in the Nepalese labor market are dominantly influenced by gender and regional disparities. The labor force participation rate according to the survey is 79.4 percent for women and 80.9 percent for men, although both sexes are engaged in similar types of employment opportunities available to them, female employment is dominant in self-employment, especially in agriculture as observed at 67.7 percent while 53.6 percent of male workers (Ghosh et al., 2017). There is however progress in increasing women's employment in non-agriculture wage employment; nationally, they are over-concentrated in low-productive informality, thus increasing income disparities (Mehta & Awasthi, 2019). Changes from the agriculture sector to diversified sectors have led to the reduction of agricultural employment but poverty and gender inequality problems persist especially in rural areas where men are most dominant in long-term migration (Mishra, 2020; Sharma, 2024). It is more or less a migration of males since the socio-cultural gender prejudices majorly restrict ignorant women from accessing better employment opportunities (Mehta & Awasthi, 2019; Mishra, 2020). This has called for the

development of policies aimed at increasing access to education and vocational training for women to improve their status and performance in the labor market (Chakrabarty & Ray, 2019; Singh, 2024).

The employment structure is highly gendered with male employment in most activities dominating the male employment in Nepal (Khadka, 2020). Most employed women are unpaid family workers employed in the agriculture sector with regional differences by ecological regions (Kafle, 2015). Education factors such as higher education Employment of women are inversely related to their financial status; however, for women, who were employed, higher education means they are more likely to get paid employment (Kafle, 2015). Male migration for work hurts women's market work employment rate thus revealing some gender aspects in household welfare (Lokshin & Glinskayai, 2008). In South Asia and Nepal, female employment rates do not seem to have increased significantly since 2001 and even with the rising percentage of female employment, there is a higher employment rate in the rural regions than in any urban center (Najeeb et al., 2020). The employment rate often sharply declines with age, particularly middle-aged women and women with some College or University education experience lower employment than those who have less education or advanced education.

It is hoped that this work will help bridge the identified gaps in the current literature by exploring how gender and regional inequalities interact in shaping employment prospects in the Nepalese labour market. The primary research question guiding this investigation is: When comes to employment issues in Nepal, how do gender and regional biases affect labor market? This is a key question because earlier studies continue to reveal gender disparities in labour market, employment, and regional distribution (ILO, 2022; CBS, 2021). However, Nepal's labor market today is still characterized by gender and regional disparities which limited the economic opportunities of the population. Sharma (2025) underscores the significance of culturally adapted strategies in addressing depression among Nepalese individuals, highlighting the necessity of investing in rural infrastructure, integrating mental health services into primary care, and reducing costs through subsidization. It attempts to explore how men and women are being employed, their employment profiles, and participation rates and hence, identify employment differences between the two genders in this Nepalese context. The research will reveal 'how gender impacts employment opportunities and equity for sectors, for policy interventions'. In enriching the knowledge of gender-based discrimination and segregation in the labor market by incorporating the aspects of regional inequity, the research is useful in providing bases for formulating policies for gender equity as well as regional employment equity. Relying on the framework of segmented labor markets and gendered economic division of labor, the paper explores

gender-related structural factors that entrench gender disparities and makes policy-relevant evidence-informed suggestions to the national and global policymakers based on existing national surveys and cross-national databases.

Method and Procedures

The Nepal Living Standard Survey 2022/23 adapts the conventional method of defining a household and the sampling technique used is two-stage stratified sampling and the sample is purposely selected to be nationally and fifteen analytical domains representative; the domains are the seven provinces outside the Kathmandu valley area, the rural and urban of Kathmandu valley area. Many changes have been made to the questionnaire to make it correspond with the current-day problems as well as the consumption habits and tendencies, critical emphasis is being paid to the acquisition of data on food intake, expenditure that is not tied to food products, as well as durable goods. Conducting the actual data collection was time-consuming, the staff was trained extensively and data were collected and entered online in real time to reduce errors.

Sampling Design

NLSS-IV situates itself with an improved sampling frame from the Population and Housing Census 2021. It is nationally representative as well as representative for 15 domains or Strata; urban and rural separately of the seven provinces and Kathmandu Valley urban. It does not, however, have a panel sample like that being used in the NLSS-III. The sampling method adopted in the study was a conventional two-stage stratified sampling technique. During the first stage, employing the complete list of census EAS as PSUs 800 EA's were selected from the fifteen domains by applying PPS. In the selected areas, detailed household listing was done using tablets to update the list of households. The actual procedure was to list all the households in a selected enumeration area, and then sort the resulting list of households (on a statewide basis) according to the size of the households (implicit stratification). Each was purposively selected at the EA level and all households in post-listing or sorted list sampling frame in each EA were considered the secondary sampling units (SSUs) to be randomly selected with equal probability.

Statistical Unit

The NLSS-IV employed a standard Two-Stage Stratified Sampling technique where the census Enumeration Areas (EAs) are the Primary Sampling Units (PSUs) in the first stage and households are the Secondary Sampling Units (SSUs) in the second

stage. The definition of a household used herein is a direct extraction from United Nations "Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses, Rev 3" By the Department of Economic and Social Affairs Statistics Division, UN 2017. Based on the guideline the concept of household is defined by the kind of arrangements made by persons individually or in groups of offering themselves food or other essentials for life. A household can be composed of one individual, or several persons living in a size that they can combine their incomes, share any expenses, or are related or unrelated. For this survey, a 'household head,' is any person presents in the household and oversees the functioning of the household.

Coverage

The survey is a generalization of the whole country with accidental samples and random samples from fifteen domains (strata) urban and rural areas of seven provinces and Kathmandu Valley and urban separately. All households in the country were included in the selection frame for the survey except those of diplomatic missions and institutional households (residential schools, hostels, prisons, army camps and hospitals). The criterion used in defining household members was according to their place of residence.

Questionnaire Design

The NLSS-IV questionnaire which has been administered to households in NLSS-IV is designed on similar lines as the NLSS-III household questionnaire. In NLSS-IV, there are some differences in which the community questionnaire was excluded from the previous rounds. The survey formation used the NLSS-III tool but with enhancements and alterations to suit the current assessment. The sections on marriage and maternity history, anthropometry and breastfeeding, which were included in the last round, were excluded in this round. Given the shift in the consumption pattern between 2011 and 2023, the survey expanded the list of foods, the disaggregated list of other items of daily use, and the list of durable items that were useful to capture household welfare in contemporary society. Thus, the NLSS-IV obtains the household consumption and expenditure data on the items in addition to those encompassed by the NLSS-III. The NLSS-IV retained the recall period for food consumption as was done in the NLSS-III but for a slight modification that was done to collect information on meals consumed outside the home for every member of the household separately, a seasoned questionnaire was pre-tested several times and the final version was made after the technical and steered committee of the NLSS IV had approved it.

Field Teams

NLSS-IV data was accrued over the period of one year from July 2022 to June 2023. The fieldwork was designed to cover the sample across the three seasons of summer, monsoon and winter in the Nepal region.

Data Entry and Management

Field teams keyed in their data on laptop computers while they were in the field so that any missing or inconsistent data could be pointed out and corrected by the team led by the supervisor, who was 17 Nepal Living Standards Survey IV. This enabled the team to visit the household for actual data in case the wrong data was recorded in the field. With the help of a real-time dashboard, this was further done in parallel at the national/aggregate level by the NSO and the error was communicated to the concerned field teams on real real-time basis. This practice ensured the quality of data collected in the region and reduced the time used in data processing. To do the further processing, cleaning and quality checks, STATA was used by NSO.

Results and Discussion

Results

The result analysis of the labor market shows that age and provinces play an essential role in determining the employment status in Nepal. Employment status reveals that the peak age group for employment is the working ages of 25-44 years (46.2%), followed by the second productive age group 45-64 years (34%) while the 65 years + employment ratio is at a low 7.8 percent.

Table 1

Labour Market Indicator by Province and Age Category (15 Years and Above)

Age Category	Employed (%)	Unemployed (%)	Outside Labour Force (%)	Total (%)	Unemployment Rate (%)	Labour Force Participation Rate (%)
Nepal	32.4	4.7	62.9	100	12.6	37.1
15-24	20.5	6	73.5	100	22.7	26.5
25-44	46.2	6	47.8	100	11.5	52.2
45-64	34	2.8	63.2	100	7.5	36.8
65+	7.8	0.7	91.5	100	8	8.5
Koshi	31.7	4.3	64.0	100.0	12.0	36.0
Madhesh	32	1.9	66.1	100	5.5	33.9
Bagmati	40.9	4.2	54.9	100	9.4	45.1

Gandaki	33.6	7.3	59.1	100	17.9	40.9
Lumbini	27.9	7	65.1	100	20	34.9
Karnali	25.6		66.4	100	23.8	33.6
Sudurpaschim	24.4	3.5	72.1	100	12.5	27.9

Table 1 shows that youth between the age of 15-24 are most affected by unemployment (22.7%), proving they have a difficult time finding jobs, and 73.5 percent of youth are outside the workforce, corresponding to elderly people at 91.5 percent. According to the provincial statistics, Bagmati province has the highest employment and labor force participation rates of 40.9 percent and 45.1 percent respectively, which shows better economic opportunities, Sudurpaschim province has the lowest employment and labor force participation rates of 24.4 percent and Karnali has the second lowest 25.6 percent. Karnali and Lumbini provinces also have relatively high unemployment levels, where the unemployment was established to be 23,8 percent in Karnali and 20 percent in Lumbini. Nationally, the employment to total population ratio of Nepal is 32.4 percent while other populations that are in the group of unemployed are 62.9 percent; therefore, labor force participation rate is a meager 37.1 percent. These results highlight the necessity of organizing prevention activities for youth unemployment, the development of measures that would stimulate employment in regions, including Karnali and Sudurpaschim provinces, and the promotion of employment opportunities for vulnerable populations, including those in the context of COVID-19.

Table 2

Employment by Sector of Economy and Employment Type (15 years and above)

	Employment by Sector (%)		Employment by Type (%)				
Category	Agriculture	Non-Agriculture	Paid Agri	Paid Non-Agri	Self Agriculture	Self Non-Agriculture	Unpaid HH both
Nepal	13.3	86.7	10.4	56.6	1.9	22.6	8.4
Male	9.9	90.1	7.3	63.2	2	23.4	4.1
Female	19.5	80.5	16	44.8	1.6	21.3	16.3
Province							
Koshi	16.9	83.1	12.7	49.8	2.7	25	9.8
Male	13.6	86.4	10.1	56.7	3	24.8	5.4
Female	22.5	77.5	17.4	37.8	2.1	25.2	17.4

Madhesh	21.8	78.2	21.2	55.3	0.4	18.4	4.8
Male	14.5	85.5	13.9	62.9	0.5	19.8	2.9
Female	41.1	58.9	40.7	34.9	0	14.4	10
Bagmati	8.2	91.8	5.4	62.2	1.6	22.3	8.4
Male	6.5	93.5	3.8	66.6	1.8	24	3.8
Female	10.9	89.1	8	55.3	1.3	19.6	15.8
Gandaki	15	85	11.9	51.8	2.1	24.7	9.6
Male	9.7	90.3	6.8	60.5	2.6	25.4	4.7
Female	21.6	78.4	18.3	40.8	1.4	23.7	15.8
Lumbini	9.3	90.7	5.8	56.9	2.5	24.2	10.6
Male	7.1	92.9	4.1	63.6	2.4	25.2	4.7
Female	13.6	86.4	9.2	43.5	2.8	22.2	22.3
Karnali	11.1	88.9	3.5	59.6	5.3	23.5	8.1
Male	9	91	2.3	67.5	5.7	20.5	4
Female	14.5	85.5	5.5	46.4	4.7	28.6	14.8
Sudurpaschim	8.3	91.7	4.7	58.8	2.1	25	9.4
Male	5.7	94.3	2.5	65.9	2.2	24.7	4.7
Female	12.9	87.1	8.8	45.5	1.8	25.6	18.2

The employment patterns by sector and type showed that gender and regional disparity by sector exist in Nepal. At a national level, outside agriculture is much more pronounced (86.7 %), than agriculture (13.3%). Non-agricultural employment: 90.1 percent of employees are males, while only 9.9 percent, are females' total agriculture: 19.5 percent of the target audience is female while 80.5 percent is male. Paid employment is much higher in non-agriculture (56.6%) than in agriculture (10.4%) and women are more involved in unpaid family work (16.3%) than men 4.1 percent At the regional level Bagmati represents the highest non-agricultural employment (90.8%) indicating urbanization and Madhesh and Koshi shows comparatively higher agricultural employment(21.8% and 16.9% respectively.). Two regions Karnali and Sudurpaschim have relatively high reliance on agriculture and unpaid work, indicating low levels of employees in formal employment. These trends suggest the necessity of specific measures, i.e., gender and regional equalization, focused on employment issues.

Table 3
Labor Force Participation Rate by Province

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares (SS)	Degrees of Freedom (df)	Mean Square (MS)	F-Statistic	p-value
Between Groups (Provinces)	373.26	6	62.21	25.03	0.0001
Within Groups (Error)	48.29	40	1.21		
Total	421.55	46			

It also compares variations in labour force participation rates (LFPR) between different provinces. The value of the between-groups sum of squares, SS =373.26, suggests a large variability of the level of LFPR across the provinces and explains most of the total variability, SS =421.55. SS =48.29 and it indicates that the between groups degree of dispersion is also moderate, showing that the variation of LFPR within each located individual province is not much. The calculated F-statistic is 25.03 the p-value is 0.0001 and therefore at a 95 percent confidence level we reject the null hypothesis of no significant difference in LFPR across the provinces. This may imply that province-level variables have a very significant effect on LFPR and calls for a comprehensive study of regional socio-economic and policy influences on LFPR.

Table 4
Regression Results on Labor Force Participation Rate and Employment Indicators

Variable	Coefficient (β)	Standard Error	t-Statistic	p-value	95% Confidence Interval
Constant	100	1.72E-11	5.82E+12	0	[100.000, 100.000]
Age 15-24 Employed (%)	1.78E-15	7.07E-14	0.025	0.984	[-8.97e-13, 9e-13]
Age 25-44 Employed (%)	-1.78E-15	6.34E-14	-0.028	0.982	[-8.08e-13, 8.04e-13]
Age 45-64 Employed (%)	-1.78E-15	3.59E-14	-0.05	0.968	[-4.57e-13, 4.54e-13]
Age 65+ Employed (%)	-7.11E-15	3.04E-13	-0.023	0.985	[-3.88e-12, 3.86e-12]

Unemployed (%)	-7.11E-15	2.10E-13	-0.034	0.978	[-2.67e-12, 2.66e-12]
Outside Labor Force (%)	-1	1.48E-13	-6.77E+12	0	[-1.000, -1.000]

The regression analysis determines the correlation of LFPR with the distinction of employment status and age groups. The constant term reveal that in hypothesis condition, meaning in absence of variation of the independent variables the value of LFPR was be 100 percent with very significant relationship (p=0). Overall employment proportions in all age categories from 15-24, 25-44, and 45-64 plus, and 65 plus have negligible coefficients and insignificant p-values meaning that they are not determinant affecting the LFPR. Likewise, the unemployment exhibits no evidence of having substantial effect. But, the coefficient of outsiders of labor force, negatively correlates with the LFPR (β = -1, p=0) by definition. These findings imply that age-related employment and unemployment rates are not directly related to LFPR, though a focus on the rates of people outside the labor force is important for increasing participation. To understand other ways in which LFPR may be affected other than age related employment, then further research is needed.

Discussion

This study suggests that there are huge differences in labor market in Nepal, especially across age groups, gender and provinces, which reflect structural and regional reality. The employment rates among workers aged 25–44 equal 46.2percent which is not far from global average among all workers where 45.5percent of them are employed; and the workers aged 45–64 with the overall employment level of 34percent which is actually higher than the global average where 27.2 percent of them are employees (ILO, 2022). On the other hand, the employment to population ratio of the elderly population (65+) is 7.8 percent which is possibly due to retirement and low capacity to work, supported by various aging and employment literature reviews (Chand, 2018). A high level of NEY (22.7percent) and a large percentage of non-workers under 15–24 years (73.5%), confirm constraints to entering the labor market, which aligns with South Asian studies on difficulties for youth labor force integration (Chakravarty et al., 2019). They imply the required public policies, including skill development and demanded youth employment policies, to consider the labor market.

Further inequalities are unveiled by provincial variations in the employment rates. Bagmati has the highest employment and labor force participation rate both of which show signs of urbanization and access to economic opportunities as pointed out earlier by Timsina et al. On the other extreme, Sudurpaschim and Karnali provinces

have low employment and participation rates and high unemployment, among them, Karnali Province has a 23.8 percent unemployment rate and Lumbini Province 20 percent.

These results support prior research revealing how insufficient development and economic activities reduced the employment rate in regions of Nepal (Kaiser & Barstow, 2022) action and access to economic opportunities, as previously reported by Timsina et al. (2020). Conversely, Sudurpaschim and Karnali provinces exhibit the lowest employment and participation rates, coupled with high unemployment, as seen in Karnali (23.8%) and Lumbini (20%). These findings align with studies showing the impact of limited infrastructure and economic activity on regional employment levels in Nepal (Kaiser & Barstow, 2022). These discrepancies are essential to be closed by investing in the regions, focusing on industries, transport and educational systems.

The existing trends indicate that men and women have significantly different employment patterns. The labor force map shows that women are predominant in agriculture at 19.5 percent, and unpaid care giving at 16.3 percent while men have dominion of paid and non-agriculture employment percent. These findings are in line with studies that point to the perennial issues of gender disparities that affect women employees in the Nepalese labour market as shown indicated by studies by Khadka (2020). The issues that affect women in the Nepalese labour market include; access to education and credit. Provincially, provinces such as Bagmati have relatively higher non-agricultural employment proportion, and provinces such as Karnali and Sudurpaschim rely mostly on agriculture and unpaid, indicating that there are limited employment opportunities in formal employment in the provinces. Addressing these gender and regional inequalities entails gender-transformative economic policies and programs that create employment in the forms that are recognized by the law.

Moreover, the analysis of variance (ANOVA) highlights a very high degree of variability in labour force participation rates (LFPR) by province by presenting a high F-cal value of 25.03 and a very low p-value of 0.0001. Thus, this result implies that provincial characteristics including economic development, transportation networks and institutional measures have a strong bearing on LFPR. This can be paralleled with other regional investigations stressing SES impacts on LM participation (Pant et al., 2024).

The analysis realizes that the least squared regression equation indicates that the proportion outside labor force is the most significant predictor of LFPR (β= -1; p=0). Such variables as employment and unemployment rates by age categories do not exhibit significant impacts. This is in synergy with research findings showing that the elimination of system constraints like lack of education, health care and family support play a key role in increasing the labour force participation (Koirala, 2021). Therefore, such literature highlights the importance of policies, that may improve the characteristics

of employment and, therefore, economic reintegration of excluded segments including prejudiced communities and underrepresented provinces in Nepal.

Conclusion

A gender and age disaggregated analysis of labor market indicators in this paper indicates that youth, female, and provincial disparities that exist in Nepal are highly pronounced. Productive-age employees (25–44 and 45–64 years) surveyed for the employment rates exhibit numerous opportunities consistently higher than those either unemployed or inactive in the labor market among the youth (15–24) and the elderly (65+). The employment participation rates do appear disparate within provinces with Bagmati province enjoying high employment from high participation emanating from high urbanization levels, while Sudurpaschim and Karnali provinces suffer low employment participation and high unemployment rates compounded by low participation in arable farming to feed them. The roles are still fairly divided by gender, with women being most dominant in the unpaid category such as agriculture thus implying that there are blank policies that need to be fulfilled to encourage more women to be economically active.

Therefore, the current study advocates for the need to overcome structural factors, the likes of education, skills development, as well as access to employment in the labour market. Socioeconomic characteristics of provinces directly affect labour force characteristics and call for policy targeted at regions. It is therefore recommended that future papers look into the relationship between employment opportunities, education and training so as to provide an input to policy making.

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