

# Women's Agency and Social Change in Nepal: A Marxist Perspective

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## ABSTRACT

*The Constitution of Nepal 2015 provides substantial opportunities for women's empowerment through its provisions for their rights and facilities. This legal framework represents a socio-political shift aimed at development, positioning women's agency as a critical tool for social change. However, Nepal's multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-lingual, and multi-cultural society presents diversity in women's socio-economic status and agency across different communities. This paper examines women's agency and social change in Nepal, drawing on the perspectives of Sen (1999), Bhandari (1993), and Marxist writings. It critically analyzes women's agency, using data from literature and secondary source. Women's agency, defined as the freedom to pursue goals and values, is essential for promoting social justice and well-being. Cooperative conflict and perceptions of entitlement within families emphasize the importance of women's economic independence, education, and property rights. Women's agency is linked to significant outcomes, including improved child survival, reduced fertility rate, and enhanced socio-economic roles. Nepal's constitution supports women's agency through its rights and provisions, contributing to declining gender inequality and improved health and educational outcomes.*

## Introduction

The constitution of Nepal provides substantial opportunities for the upliftment of women through provisions of their rights and facilities. As the constitution represents the contemporary socio-political change for development, women's agency becomes a more robust tool for social change in the context of Nepal. However, Nepal has a heterogeneous population with multi-ethnic (142 caste/ethnic groups), multi-religious (10 religious groups), multi-lingual (124 dialects as mother tongue), and multi-cultural societies (Constituent Assembly 2, 2015; National Statistics

Office, 2023a). There exists diversity in women's socio-economic status and, ultimately, women's agency among the cultures and communities.

Agency is what a person is free to do and achieve in pursuit of whatever goals or values he or she regards as important (Sen, 1985). The interplay of the well-being and agency aspects has created a new paradigm. The agency aspect provides 'social justice to women' regarding deprivations of equality. Women's agency aims at removing the inequities that depress the well-being of women, and thus, resulting in unequal power relations.

Sen (1985) argued that agency is the freedom to

pursue one's goals and values and is an essential aspect of well-being. The interplay between agency and well-being has led to a new paradigm that recognizes the importance of agency in promoting social justice for women. Women's agency can help remove the inequities that depress their well-being and lead to deprivations of equality. This is imperative, given the many barriers that women face in accessing adequate healthcare, including reproductive care, and in securing leadership positions in higher education. A social justice perspective emphasizes the importance of equity, justice, respect, care, and collaboration in achieving the goal of social justice. Rawls (1971) claimed that social justice incorporates two principles: the first involves individuals having an equal right to fundamental liberties, and the second involves giving the greatest social and economic benefits to those least advantaged and attaching those benefits to offices and positions fairly and equitably.

Sen has firmly raised the issue, stating that "... the limited role of women's active agency seriously afflicts the lives of all people, men, as well as women, children as well as adults" (Sen, 1999, p. 191). This reflects how meaningful women's active agency is within our societal context.

This paper discusses the changing perspectives on women's well-being and the role of women's agency in social change (Ayala & Murga, 2016). Women's contributions to the world development often remain unrecognized. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that women are not passive recipients in global processes but active agents who can influence and contribute to social change. Through their expanded stock of scientific and technological capital, women have the potential to exert a significant impact on all spheres of economic and social development. They shape the progression of global changes and contribute to challenging orthodox approaches and developing alternative paradigms. Globalization, digital innovation, and climate change continue to reshape our world (Dugarova, 2023). These

changes present both challenges and opportunities for women's economic potential. In realizing women's economic potential, it is essential to recognize and harness women's agency in navigating these changes (Emon & Nipa, 2024; Goryunova et al., 2017; Kakade et al., 2024).

## **Methodology**

This paper delves into women's agency and social change concerning the perspectives of Sen (1999), Bhandari (1993), and other Marxist writings, incorporating the most recent data available. Relevant literatures from various sources, such as journal articles, book chapters, reports, and other publications have been used to examine the relationship between Marxist views and women's agency. I have used recent census data Nepal demographic and health survey 2022 data and other relevant statistics. The paper mainly discusses how perspectives on women's well-being have shifted from the so-called welfarist approach to recognizing the active role of women's agency, considering both men and women as active agents of social transformation, ultimately changing their lives.

Furthermore, women's ability to earn an independent income, work outside the home, be educated, and own property are critical factors in strengthening their agency. These resources enable women to make choices and exercise control over their lives, contributing to their well-being and empowerment. Therefore, the perception of entitlement through women's empowerment and independent agency has joint benefits for both women and society.

## **The Marxist perspective on women's agency in social change**

The Marxist view disregards the traditional welfarist approach that saw women as passive recipients of aid and support rather than active agents of social transformation (Sarker, 2006; Vijayamohan et al., 2009). Marxists argue that this paternalistic view did not empower women to take an active role in their development.

Marxist feminists emphasize the importance of women's economic participation and access to education as key factors in empowering them and increasing their agency (Acosta-Belen & Bose, 1990; Connelly et al., 2000). They argue that economic independence and education enable women to access decision-making processes and challenge existing power structures.

Marxist feminists blame the capitalist mode of production as a primary cause of women's oppression and subordination in society (Lin & Wang, 2023). They argue that the separation of the public (workplace) and private (household) spheres under capitalism has led to the devaluation of women's unpaid domestic and reproductive labor, relegating them to a secondary status. Moreover, Marxist feminists contend that merely implementing gender equality measures within the capitalist system is insufficient (Lin & Wang, 2023). They argue that true liberation for women requires fundamentally restructuring the economic and social system, going beyond reforms to challenge the root causes of gender inequality embedded in capitalism.

Marxists view social change as a collective endeavor where both men and women are seen as active agents of transformation (Adam, 1993). They emphasize the need to recognize the value of all labor, including unpaid domestic and reproductive work, to achieve true gender equality (Gimenez, 2018; McCarthy et al., 2021). Therefore, the Marxist perspective emphasizes the need to address the systemic roots of women's oppression in the capitalist system, empowering women through education and economic participation, and recognizing their collective agency as active agents of social change.

### **Agency and well-being**

Agency and well-being discuss women's earning power, economic roles outside the family, literacy, education, property rights, independence, empowerment, women's voice, and their social standing in society. Although these issues favor women's empowerment, the ultimate impact on

society is overall development. There is a saying that if you want to change the world for the future, you prioritize educating the girl child. This saying symbolizes the importance of women's agency in restructuring and developing society. Thus, women's education is the tool that strengthens women's agency and eventually gives rise to a more informed and skilled population of women, leading to social change that creates a more just society.

Sen (1999) posits that men and women have both congruent and conflicting interests, aiming for the shared benefit of both parties. Cooperative conflicts provide a fairer deal for both women and men, with disparate interests resolved through implicitly agreed patterns of behavior.

The perception of who is doing how much "productive" work or who is "contributing" how much to the family's prosperity can be very influential, even though the underlying "theory" regarding how "contributions" and "productivity" are to be assessed may rarely be discussed explicitly (Sen, 1999: 193). Although women have a greater work burden throughout the day compared to men in the Nepali context, the productivity factor tends to be weighed higher for men.

It is expected that while men and women may share some common interests, they also have divergent interests. These interests are intended for the shared benefit of both parties, indicating that cooperation and mutual understanding are essential for achieving positive outcomes for both men and women. Cooperative conflicts, therefore, provide a fairer deal for both women and men (Sen, 1999). Approaching conflicts cooperatively can lead to fair and beneficial outcomes for both parties. This approach emphasizes the importance of mutual respect, compromise, and understanding in resolving conflicts and reaching mutually satisfactory solutions (Deutsch, 2003).

When there are differences in interests between men and women, these differences are addressed

through unspoken or understood ways of behaving. Such behavior may involve implicit agreements, compromise, and mutual accommodation to ensure that the interests of both parties are considered and respected (Sen, 1999). Therefore, cooperative conflicts focus on recognizing and addressing both the common and divergent interests of men and women in a cooperative and mutually beneficial manner. This ultimately brings about fair and equitable outcomes for both parties.

### **Perceptions of entitlement**

Women's ability to earn an independent income, work outside the home, be educated, and own property makes their agency more powerful. Intra-family allocation of food and healthcare, perceptions of entitlement, and the contribution of women's work outside the home are visible factors that contribute to a family's prosperity (Baruah, 2009; Rauhut & Hatti, 2021).

Women's ability to earn an independent income, work outside the home, be educated, and own property helps strengthen their agency. When women have access to these resources, they are better able to make choices and exercise control over their lives, which contributes to their overall well-being and empowerment. For instance, when women earn an independent income, they are less dependent on their partners or families for financial support (Land, 2022; Zunaidi & Maghfiroh, 2021). This financial independence gives them greater control over their lives and enables them to make decisions in their best interest. They can invest in their education, start a business, or save for the future.

Similarly, educated women are better equipped to navigate the world and make informed decisions. Education provides women with the skills and knowledge they need to pursue their goals and aspirations, and it also helps them challenge gender stereotypes and discrimination (Land, 2022; Zunaidi & Maghfiroh, 2021). Likewise, when women own property, they

have a tangible asset that they can use to secure their financial future. Property ownership also gives women a sense of security and stability, which can contribute to their overall well-being (Gonçalves et al., 2021).

Sen (1999) notes that women's work outside the home contributes to the family's prosperity. Women can contribute to the family's financial well-being by working and earning an income. This income can be used to fulfill the family's basic needs, such as food and healthcare, and it can also be used to invest in the family's future, such as education for children.

Moreover, intra-family allocation of food and healthcare is essential to women's agency. When women participate in decision-making within the family on how resources are allocated, they can ensure that their own needs and the needs of their children are met (Sen, 1999). This can lead to better health outcomes for women and children and greater well-being.

The perceptions of entitlement are also crucial in strengthening women's agency. When women are seen as entitled to the same rights and opportunities as men, they are more likely to be able to exercise their agency and make choices that are in their best interest (Kabeer, 1999; Mosedale, 2005). This can lead to greater gender equality and empowerment for women (Kabeer, 2005; Mosedale, 2005). It increases decision-making power significantly in childbearing and rearing, eventually reducing fertility and child mortality.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Child survival and the agency of women**

Women's education and literacy are essential for enhancing women's agency, which significantly reduces child mortality rates. Women's empowerment strongly influences reducing gender bias in survival, such as decreasing sex-selective abortions. The absence of certain factors hinders child survival in our population. Higher female literacy rates (Hill & King,

1995), increased female labor force participation, lower incidence of poverty (and higher levels of income) (James-Hawkins et al., 2018), greater urbanization, availability of medical facilities, and the proportion of socially underprivileged groups (scheduled castes and scheduled tribes) in the population, and involvement in gainful employment all positively impact women's agency roles. These factors emphasize child care with joint family decisions (Hérault & Kalb, 2022; Hill & King, 1995; James-Hawkins et al., 2018; Mukherjee, 2013). However, men's participation in childcare might sustain the double burden of household chores and outside employment. Female literacy also strengthens women's agency and promotes child survival. Recent data for Nepal show that both the under-five mortality rate and maternal mortality ratio have declined by more than 70 percent (UNICEF et al., 2019).

This overview is largely theoretical and general. To provide a more comprehensive analysis, it is important to explore empirical facts and specific situations based on geographical location, caste/ethnicity, and distinctions between rural and urban areas.

### **Agency, emancipation, and fertility reduction**

Women's well-being and agency help change fertility patterns. The enhancement of women's status and power has helped reduce birth rates. This notion has been illustrated by the following statement made by Sen as:

The unwillingness of educated women to be shackled to continuous child-rearing plays a role in bringing about this change. Education also makes the horizon of vision wider and, at a more mundane level, helps to disseminate the knowledge of family planning. And, of course, educated women tend to have greater freedom to exercise their agency in family decisions, including in matters of fertility and childbirth. (p.199)

Certainly, educated women are more likely to seek opportunities beyond traditional roles, such as

continuous child-rearing, and are better equipped to make informed decisions about their futures. The total fertility rate (TFR) of Nepal, as of the latest census, has declined to the replacement level of fertility (2.1 per woman) along with the increasing trend of female literacy for 5 years and above (69.37%). Additionally, the singulate mean age at marriage (SMAM) for the female population has increased to 21.83 years (National Statistics Office, 2023b).

Let's take an example: an educated woman who has pursued higher education and established a career may be unwilling to focus solely on continuous child-rearing. Instead, she may seek a balance between her career and family life or delay or limit the number of children she has to pursue her professional goals. Also, educated women are more likely to be aware of and have access to various family planning methods, which allows them to make choices that align with their personal and professional aspirations.

### **Women's political, social, and economic roles**

The empowerment of women is a central issue in national development. The changing agency of women is one of the primary mediators of economic and social change. Women's evolving social and economic roles signify a central feature of the developmental process (Oppenheimer, 1994). Nepal has achieved significant improvement in women's political participation, mostly after the first constituent assembly election. Women have attained and held the most prominent positions, from President, Chief Justice, and Speaker of the House, to local representatives at the ward level of the local governments (Election Commission Nepal, 2022). Similarly, the proportion of women employed among economically active women has also increased to 34.07 percent, while it is 42.97 percent for both sexes (National Statistics Office, 2024). Therefore, the essential aspect of what Sen (1999) has emphasized how women's agency not only brings about social change but



also provisions the notion of development as freedom can be quoted as:

An extensive reach of women's agency is one of the more neglected areas of development studies and most urgently needs correction. Arguably, nothing is as important today in the political economy of development as an adequate recognition of women's political, economic, and social participation and leadership of women. This is a crucial aspect of "Development as Freedom (Sen, 1999: 203).

### **What women's agency can do?**

Women's agency is essential for promoting social justice by challenging gender norms, addressing systemic barriers, and empowering women to fully participate in society. Women's agency is the ability to make choices and exercise control over their lives, which is vital for maintaining social justice as it aims to ensure equal rights, opportunities, and resources for women in all aspects of society.

In Nepali societies, women's agency is essential as it can contribute to social justice in several ways. The Constitution of Nepal establishes the following norms to ensure women's agency for social change (Constituent Assembly 2, 2015).

### **Reducing gender inequality**

Women's agency helps reduce gender inequality by challenging traditional gender roles and stereotypes and promoting equal opportunities for women in education, employment, and decision-making processes. The Constitution of Nepal 2015, Article 38, provides women's rights such as the right to lineage, safe motherhood and reproduction, protection from all forms of exploitation, and equal rights in family matters and property (Constituent Assembly 2, 2015). Moreover, gender equality has also been included in the Directive Principles of the Constitution. Recent data show that the Gender Inequality Index (GII) in Nepal has declined from 0.38 in 2019 to 0.29 in 2022 (National

Planning Commission, 2023), indicating an improvement in women's status.

### **Improving well-being**

Women's agency is linked to better health, educational, and economic outcomes for women, contributing to a more just and equitable society. Recent data from the Nepal Demographic and Health Survey reveal a significant improvement in the decline in under-5 mortality (33 per thousand in 2022 from 54 per thousand in 2011) and infant mortality (28 per thousand live births in 2022 from 46 per thousand live births in 2011). Moreover, the percentage of women having at least four antenatal care visits for their most recent live births increased to 81 percent in 2022, with childhood vaccination reaching 80 percent. The data also reveal a remarkable reduction in the proportion of stunted and wasted children, with respective proportions of 25 percent and 8 percent reflecting the improvement in the nutritional status of children in Nepal (Ministry of Health and Population et al., 2022). Women's education has significantly reduced the undernutrition of children, especially among communities with higher proportions of malnourished children (Ministry of Health and Population et al., 2022; MoWCSC, 2020). Since the Nepal government has gradually increased gender-responsive budgeting from 19.05 percent in 2011/12 to 40.25 percent in 2022/23, the Gender Empowerment Index (GEI) has reached 0.62, close to the 2022 SDG target of 0.63 (Ministry of Finance, 2023).

### **Enhancing political participation**

Women's agency is essential for promoting political participation and representation, which are crucial for achieving social justice. The Constitution of Nepal 2015 has ensured the participation of women in various positions in the state structures. Articles 70, 91, 92, 182, 215, 216, and 220 provide for women's positions in various political and constitutional bodies and as people's representatives (Government

of Nepal, 2015), from presidential posts to local government members. This is reflected in various positions held by women in Nepalese political leadership, bureaucracy, as well as the judiciary (MoWCSC, 2020).

### ***Strengthening social networks***

Women's agency helps build strong social networks and support systems, essential for empowering women and promoting social justice. Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) offer opportunities for women to participate in inclusive development, which the present constitution has also guaranteed (Buisson et al., 2022).

### ***Advancing human capabilities***

Women's agency is linked to expanding human capabilities, such as education, health, and political participation, which are essential for achieving social justice. Women's participation in decision-making helps strengthen society and empowers gender justice by challenging the economic injustice prevalent in our societies (Kabeer, 2021).

## **Women's Agency and PMPD**

People's Multiparty Democracy highlights issues of women's empowerment, equality between the rights and choices of men and women, and maintaining social justice (Bhandari, 1993). In the chapter 'Contemporary Programme of Nepalese Revolution' in his writing, 'People's Multiparty Democracy', Bhandari (1993) discusses women's issues and proposes how PMPD will ensure policies for women. PMPD discusses the following issues, which are essential in every society for inclusive development.

### ***Equal rights for sons and daughters***

One significant aspects of the proposed plan is to ensure equal rights for sons and daughters concerning ancestral property. Historically, inheritance laws have favored sons over daughters, perpetuating gender inequality within families and societies (Bhandari, 1993).

By guaranteeing equal rights to both sons and daughters, this initiative seeks to rectify this longstanding injustice. Such a measure promotes fairness within families and contributes to broader societal progress by challenging traditional gender norms and promoting gender equality in property ownership.

### ***Eradication of social evils against women.***

The plan also emphasizes the eradication of various social evils against women, including exploitation, repression, kidnapping, trafficking, and prostitution (Bhandari, 1993). These forms of violence and exploitation have long plagued societies worldwide, disproportionately affecting women and girls. By committing to combating these issues, the plan aims to create safer and more equitable environments for women to thrive. It involves punitive measures against perpetrators and comprehensive efforts to address the root causes of such social ills, including poverty, lack of education, and gender discrimination.

### ***Implementation of equal pay policies***

Another crucial aspect of the PMPD is the effective implementation of policies ensuring equal pay for similar work between men and women (Bhandari, 1993). Despite progress in many parts of the world, the gender pay gap remains a persistent issue, with women often earning less than their male counterparts for performing the same job. By mandating equal pay for equal work, this initiative seeks to eliminate discrimination based on gender in the workplace and promote economic fairness and gender equality. Such policies benefit individual workers and contribute to overall economic growth and social stability. Women working in certain sectors such as construction (Wilson et al., 2024) and health (Bashyal, 2023) in Nepal have to confront exploitation and inequalities along with unequal wages. There needs to be substantial effort to develop policies aimed at reducing the gender pay gap for women's empowerment (Irshad Ahmad & Sudha, 2023) in sectors of employment where discrimination prevails.

### ***Guaranteeing gender equality in all sectors***

PMPD aims to guarantee gender equality in all sectors of national and social life, including the workforce and areas such as education, healthcare, politics, and decision-making processes (Bhandari, 1993). Maintaining gender equality across all sectors requires systemic changes, including laws, policies, and reforms of social norms. By prioritizing gender equality in all aspects of governance and society, this initiative seeks to create a more inclusive and equitable society where everyone, regardless of gender, has equal opportunities to thrive and contribute to the community. The sustainable development goals revised indicators prepared by the National Planning Commission (NPC) in 2023 claim that the Gender Development Index (GDI) increased to 0.61 in 2022 from 0.58 in 2019, contributing to reducing the Gender Inequality Index (GII) from 0.38 to 0.29 during the same period (National Planning Commission, 2023).

### ***Special programmes for women's empowerment and security***

Additionally, the plan proposes the implementation of special programs aimed at liberating women from ignorance and backwardness, ensuring their security, and establishing a system of severe punishment for criminals who harm them (Bhandari, 1993). These programs may include education and skills training for women, awareness campaigns on gender rights and empowerment, and measures to enhance women's access to justice and protection from violence. By investing in women's empowerment through social cohesion with integrated policy approaches (Boarini et al., 2018), this initiative not only improves the lives of individual women but also strengthens families, communities, and the nation as a whole, fostering greater social cohesion and prosperity.

People's Multiparty Democracy, as articulated by Bhandari (1993) in "Contemporary

Programme of Nepalese Revolution," aligns with Marxist principles and emphasizes women's agency by addressing systemic inequalities and promoting social justice. Marxism emphasizes eliminating class structures and creating a society where resources and opportunities are equally accessible to all individuals, regardless of their social or economic status (Marx & Engels, 1848). Similarly, PMPD seeks to dismantle gender-based disparities by ensuring equal rights for sons and daughters concerning ancestral property, thereby challenging traditional patriarchal norms that perpetuate inequality (Bhandari, 1993).

The eradication of social evils against women, such as exploitation, trafficking, and prostitution, reflects a Marxist commitment to combating all forms of oppression and exploitation (Marx, 2007). By committing to combat these issues, PMPD seeks to protect women and empower them by constructing safer and more equitable situations for them to prosper (Bhandari, 1993).

Implementing equal pay policies is another aspect where PMPD intersects with Marxist ideology. Marxism advocates for the fair distribution of wealth and resources (Marx, 2007), and by ensuring equal pay for equal work, PMPD promotes economic fairness and combats gender-based economic disparities (Bhandari, 1993). This aspect of PMPD empowers women economically, enhancing their agency and independence in the workplace.

Furthermore, PMPD's goal of guaranteeing gender equality in all sectors of society, including education, healthcare, politics, and decision-making processes, aligns with Marxist principles of creating a classless society where everyone has equal opportunities (Marx & Engels, 1848). By prioritizing systemic changes and reforms, PMPD echoes Marxist calls for revolutionary transformations to achieve true equality and social justice. This approach ensures that women have equal opportunities to



participate in and influence all areas of society, thereby enhancing their agency.

Lastly, the special programs for women's empowerment and security proposed by PMPD resonate with Marxist views on empowering the proletariat and marginalized groups through education and protection from violence (Marx & Engels, 1848). These initiatives aim to liberate women from the constraints of ignorance and backwardness, fostering a more inclusive and equitable society, a fundamental goal of Marxist philosophy (Bhandari, 1993). By investing in women's agency and empowerment, PMPD ultimately improves the lives of individual women and strengthens their ability to act as agents of change within their communities.

## Conclusion

Women's agency has multifaceted dimensions with its critical role in social change. The paper attempts to analyze through the lenses of Marxist perspectives and contemporary theoretical frameworks. The analysis reveals that women's agency is not merely a supplementary force but a central pillar for achieving gender equality and broader social justice.

The Constitution of Nepal 2015, with its progressive provisions for women's rights, strides a significant step toward recognizing and institutionalizing women's agency. However, the diverse socio-cultural landscape of Nepal presents unique challenges and opportunities in this endeavor. The integration of women's agency into development strategies highlights the importance of education, economic participation, and political representation in empowering women and fostering equitable societal transformation.

Women's agency is, therefore, indispensable for sustainable development and social progress. As articulated through Marxist and contemporary perspectives, the recognition and enhancement of women's agency are crucial for challenging existing power structures and creating alternative paradigms that support gender equality.

Empowering women improves their well-being and contributes to society's overall development, making the quest for social justice a collective and inclusive effort.

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