Role of Facilitation for Empowerment and Social Transformation (FEST) Approach in Enhancing Gender Equality and Social Inclusion in Mid-Western Nepal

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Abstract

Gender Equality and Social Inclusion are crucial for achieving social transformation, particularly in developing regions where gender roles are deeply rooted. This study examines the impact of Facilitation for Empowerment and Social Transformation(FEST) approach in multidimensional empowerment of marginalized groups in the Dang and Jajarkot districts of Nepal. These districts, having many socio-economic challenges, are representative of rural Nepal where gender and social discrimination are can be widely seen. The study tries to explore how FEST approach and its process have contributed to enhancing women's and marginalized groups status in the rural society. A mixed method survey was conducted in two districts of Nepal. Quantitative data was analyzed for 324 members of different community groups from both the control and non-control groups. Key informant interviews were conducted among community group members, including collections of some case studies are done for qualitative data.

This study, hence, tries exploring the impact of FEST to enhance Gender Equality and Social Inclusion in Dang and Jajarkot districts of Nepal. Through promoting participatory and community-driven framework, this approach claims that it helps marginalized groups, especially women and socially excluded populations, to tackle differently socially constructed barriers through different initiatives designed under each stage of its approach. Therefore, this paper argues that different stages of this approach with diversified methodology helps to enhance equality and inclusion to create better society.

Hence, collecting field data, case studies, and literature reviews, this paper tries to provide reflection light on gender empowerment, highlighting unique challenges and opportunities within these districts.

Keywords: FEST, Community Development, Gender Equality and Social Inclusion(GESI), Sustainable Development, Marginalized groups, Nepal

Introduction

Nepal's socio-political landscape is characterized by significant diversity, with multiple ethnic, linguistic, and cultural groups coexisting. However, this diversity often manifests as social stratification, where marginalized groups-particularly women, Dalits[1], and indigenous[2] communities have faced systemic exclusion from practicing their human rights. Hence Nepal, a country marked by

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[1] According to the Central Bureau of Statistics 2021 Census of Nepal, the total population of Dalits in Nepal is 13.5% censusnepal.cbs.gov.np/results/files/result-folder/National Report_English.pdf
[2] According to the Central Bureau of Statistics 2021 Census of Nepal, the total population of Indigenous People in Nepal is 35.08%

its diverse cultural landscape, has long grappled with deep-rooted gender and social inequalities. Nepal has shown its commitment to achieve 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030, among which SDG 5 is gender equality. To achieve these goals, Nepal has developed policies[3] commitments in support of gender equality and social inclusion.

Nepal's Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Policy (2021), explain Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) as "a mindset, a process, and a set of doing work expecting to achieve desired outcomes with a clear focus on ensuring that no one left out of development programs and government services". Gender equality and Social Inclusion have thus emerged as critical frameworks in addressing the disparities that have been a part of (un)conscious biasness based on gender and social groups.

The constitution of Nepal (2015) overall articulates Nepal as an inclusive State and guarantees the right to equality for all citizens of Nepal, hence the government is committed to gender equality and social inclusion through every possible aspect.

In line to these Nepal's policies and strategies, different community development organizations have been implemented different projects to create a better place for women, Dalits and Indigenous people by ensuring their better access to all the human rights. Through different times and being different, community development approaches are being introduced in Nepal from 1951 as a formal approach under the name of Village Development. The community development work since then has mainly been of charity nature and still the same pattern of support is in existence. As time moved on, there was realization of the needs of some strategic approaches, as a result many development approaches such as: Assets-based community development(ABCD), Participatory Rural Appraisal(PRA), Participatory Learning Action(PLA), and many more have been practiced and still exist. But efforts from states and NGOs could not get the expected outcome and finally the community development is not sustainable at this point of time(Sapkota & Tharu,2016).

Literature Review
Gender Equality and Social Inclusion in Nepal

Gender Equality refers to the equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities of women, men, and non-binary individuals. Gender equality aims to break down the barriers that perpetuate gender disparities in various sectors (United Nation, 2001). Social Inclusion, on the other hand, focuses on the processes that ensure marginalized groups, such as people with disabilities, ethnic minorities, or economically disadvantaged individuals, have equal access to resources, rights, and opportunities in society (World Bank, 2024).

Gender Equality and Social Inclusion have been increasingly recognized as important for sustainable development worldwide. The constitution of Nepal (2015) clearly envisions Nepal as an inclusive state and guarantees the rights to equality, social justice and freedom from discrimination to all.[4] A core aspect of the 2015 Constitution is ensuring that the policies and systems of Nepal are inclusive, particularly when it comes about the rights of women and historically excluded groups. In addition to this, it also has a clear commitment to create an egalitarian society on the basis of the principles of proportional inclusion and participation, to ensure equitable economy, prosperity and social justice (The Constitution of Nepal, 2015). Other positive provisions as per the Constitution includes affirmative action to address historical disadvantages and a prohibition of any sex or caste/ethnicity-based discrimination.

According to the Government of Nepal's Ministry of Women, Children and Senior Citizens (2019), GESI aims to ensure that all individuals, irrespective of gender, caste or ethnicity, have equal access to opportunities and resources. This is primarily very crucial in rural districts where traditional

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[3] Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Policy, 2021 (nhrcnepal.org/uploads/law/NHRC_Nepal_GESI_Policy.pdf), National Gender Equality Policy, 2077 (राष्ट्रिय लैङ्गिक समानता नीति, २०७७ - राष्ट्रिय महिला आयोग).

[4] The Constitution of Nepal, 2015, Constituent Assembly Secretariate, Singhadurbar.

patriarchal norms are prevalent (Acharya et.al, 2015). The importance of GESI in promoting social justice is further emphasized by Tamang (2022), who argues that social inclusion is not merely a matter of integrating marginalized groups into existing structures but involves a transformative process that challenges the very foundations of inequality. This perspective aligns with the broader global discourse on gender equality, as articulated in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 5, which calls for gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls (UN,2015).

Considering the importance of GESI to create a -just society, it is important to look at different dimensions (Figure:1) to see FEST approach enhances GESI .

Figure 1:Conceptual diagram showing how the FEST approach enhances GESI by focusing on three different dimensions, adapted by United Nation agency
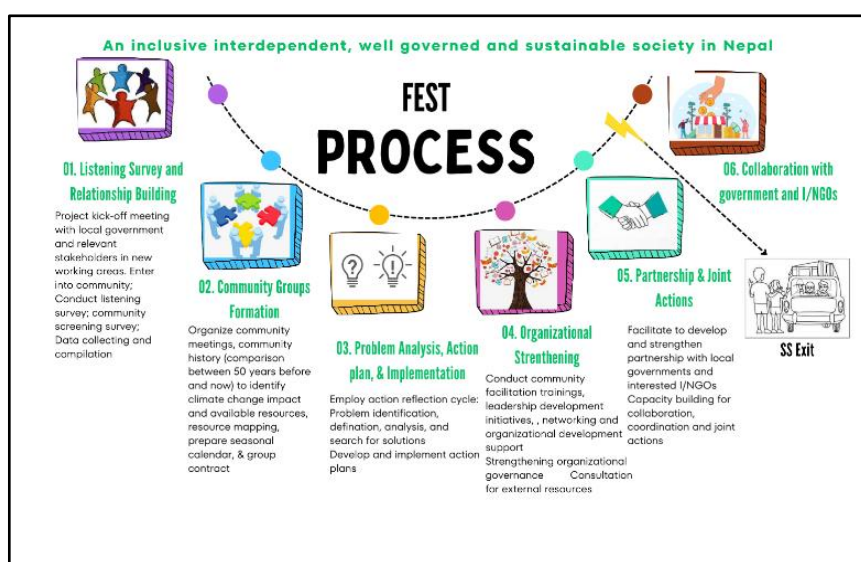

"The empowerment of women and marginalized groups in decision making processes can lead to improved outcomes for households and for the entire community, including enhanced child welfare, better nutrition, and more equitable distribution of resources" (Quisumbing, 2010). Providing equitable access to education, healthcare, and economic resources are important aspects of GESI. The access to opportunities creates enabling environment for the marginalized groups to break all the chains of exclusions. For example, educational access for girls in marginalized communities has been shown to increase literacy rates and economic participation, contributing to improving household and community well-being (UNESCO, 2021). Such efforts would reduce different types of gender and caste-based discrimination and violence. Policy interventions, legal reforms, and community-led initiatives have a very important role in breaking deep-rooted inequalities (UNDP, 2020).

Empowerment of marginalized communities to participate in decision-making processes is the main to sustainable GESI. When women and underrepresented groups are involved in leadership and governance, they bring diverse perspectives that lead to more inclusive policies and practices (Schutz,2019). Participatory development models are instrumental in amplifying marginalized voices and fostering inclusive decision-making. These models focus on engaging community members at every stage of development, from problem identification to solution implementation, empowering them to take lead (Chamber, 1997).

Facilitation for Empowerment and Social Transformation (FEST): The facilitation for Empowerment and Social Transformation (FEST) Approach is based on a "Praxis"[5] theory introduced

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[5] **Praxis Theory** (in simple terms, the way we understand things) is embedded in reflection and action, and action is embedded in reflection and theory. It can thus be seen as cycles of action, reflection, and theory building.

in 1972 by Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educationalist and philosopher. As Paulo Freire describes praxis a "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it", the FEST approach is also a process through which a community can shape its own future avoiding the influences of development blueprints. The FEST approach is a process-led and people centered approach to doing community development that has been developed to counter the dominant top-down approach of development that creates dependency on external support and funding and undermines the agency of the local community members, further disempowering rural communities. The aim of the FEST approach is to empower and capacitate marginalized communities to access services and claim their rights, take lead roles in identifying common issues and problems and initiate change in their communities or sustainable solutions (Singh, 2021). A key feature of the approach is to develop the capacity of the rural communities through mobilization, organizing and institution strengthening. This capacity development is done through skilled process facilitations by trained community facilitators with expertise in organization development.

Figure 2: FEST approach steps-based process (Source: Sahakarmi Samaj,2024)

Hence, the central philosophy of FEST is that the facilitators go into the targeted communities 'empty handed' meaning without any material or financial resources. The idea is to build an enabling environment through institution building and empowerment. The entire approach is implemented through a six -stage process (Figure:2) over 3 – 5 years period, culminating in formation of community groups, main committee groups and establishment of community-based network organizations. The FEST approach is targeted to support the disadvantaged and marginalized groups of people to combat fatalism and to bring sustainable change through a meaningful participatory process. It specifically focuses on facilitating empowerment by enabling marginalized groups to articulate their needs, engage in dialogue with powerholders, and take collective action for social change(Sahakarmi Samaj,2020).

In context of Nepal, FEST has been practiced by Sahakarmi Samaj to promote sustainable community development ensuring different social issues being addressed effectively and sustainable way. Among them is the promotion of GESI, particularly in rural areas through process focused approach ensuring the realization of empowerment and requirement of self-driven development.

Methodology
This study is a comparative study between control and non-control groups to see the effectiveness of the FEST approach, covering a total of 324 respondents from Mid-Western Region of Nepal

incorporating Dang and Jajarkot districts of Nepal. A mixed-methods approach was used, using both qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques to provide an analytical finding of the FEST intervention's impact in these districts of Nepal. Primary data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and participants observations, engaging community members, local leaders, and community facilitators. Moreover, secondary data sources, including official reports, program evaluations, and relevant case studies, were systematically reviewed to triangulate the primary data findings.

Study Area
The study focuses on Dang and Jajarkot districts in Nepal representing two different provinces of Nepal, characterized by high levels of poverty, social exclusion, and gender inequality. Dang, which is located in the inner Terai region, has a diverse population with significant representation from Tharu, Dalit, and Indigenous communities, whereas Jajarkot is situated in the mid-western hills, inhabitant by the Khas Arya, Dalit and Janajati communities.

Objectives
 This study aims to investigate the role of Facilitation for Empowerment and Social Transformation (FEST) approach in intersectional empowerment(Gender Equality and Social Inclusion) in Dang and Jajarkot. Therefore, this study has three objectives to find how FEST approach has been effective in ensuring GESI in the community through its process-led approach:

• To study about the impact of FEST approach in improving access to opportunities for women and marginalized groups.
• To study about the impact of FEST approach in empowering women and marginalized groups in decision making.
• To study about the impact of FEST approach in reducing discrimination and harmful practices against women and marginalized groups.

To investigate this, the study tries to see three different parameters of GESI. To find out the answers for those determined objectives, three different study questions were developed:

a) How has FEST approach improved access to opportunities for women and marginalized groups?
b) How has the FEST approach empowered women and marginalized groups in decision-making at different levels?
c) What impact the FEST approach had on reducing discrimination and harmful practices against women and marginalized groups?

Results and Discussion
Interpretation
1. Increased Access to opportunities

Table 1:Comparison chart between FEST control Vs non control groups showing the ratio of having access to different resources

Parameters	FEST Control	FEST non-control
Local government resources	72 %	51 %
Other local resources	89 %	43 %
Education	91 %	47 %
Health Services	68 %	35 %

Out of the total population interviewed, it was identified that >65% of individuals in FEST control groups have improved accessibility to the different services since they have engaged in the community groups practicing FEST approach (Table 1). Whereas 43% of non-control groups said that their access to these services increased. This differences shows that 22% higher level of resources access among FEST approach practicing groups, indicating that FEST targeted interventions-such as Community Group Strengthening Training(CGST), Community Facilitation Training(CFT), Community Organization Strengthening Training and problem-posing tool called 'code'[6] has been the real tools for successfully empowering those group members to remove barriers like: lack of information, knowledge and empowerment that often limited their access for women and marginalized groups.

Table 2:Comparison chart between FEST control Vs non control groups showing the ratio of level of empowerment under different parameters

Parameters	Access to saving and credit groups	Own bank account	Participation in different income generation activities	Own enterprise	Control over earning
FEST control	100 %	76 %	79 %	51 %	63 %
FEST Non control	78 %	52 %	77 %	43 %	59 %

When those respondents were asked about how they felt about economic empowerment based on the parameters (Table 2), > 61.3 % respondents reported that they have witnessed economic empowerment compared to 40.9 % in non-control groups, highlighting > 20 % differential that underscores the FEST approach effectiveness in fostering self-reliance and empowerment. Five different parameters were taken into consideration, while measuring economic empowerment , of which 100% of the participants from the FEST control groups respond that they have access to saving and credit groups, whereas 78% of the non-control groups have that. In addition to this, 76% of the control group participants have their own back account, whereas 52% of participation from non-control have same.79% of the control group participants, participation in different income generation activities, whereas 77% of participation from non-control is doing the same. In addition to these, 51% of control group participants have their own enterprise, whereas 43% of participation have that and

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[6] Code: A tool that may be a play, a mime, a role-play, a picture, a photo, a puppet show, a story, a song, a game, somebody's personal history, a field visit; anything which brings the problem into sharp focus. The code does not provide any answers.

63% of the of the control group participants have control over their earning, whereas 59% of participation from non-control have same.

Respondents from the FEST control groups attribute this to the FEST approach for making a significant difference in their changed way of thinking and practicing modality. The analysis shows that the control groups are more economically empowered because they focus on self-reliance, skills development, and sustainable livelihood opportunities through people led-approach, whereas the non-control groups are less economically empowered than that from control groups as they mainly depend on external support rather than developing self-reliance and practical skills through a structured, people-led approach.

> "In Banglachuli, Dang, Bodhika Sarki, a person with a disability, changed her life through farming after participating in the kitchen gardening and seed production training provided by the FEST practicing organisation. With the knowledge and support she gained, Bodhika established a nursery at her home, where she grew vegetables and produced seedds. By utilizing the seeds, she received along with others she acquired, Bodhika not only cultivated vegetables for her family but also sold them to her neighbours. Her dedication led to an annual income of NPR 20,000 from seed production and NPR 130,000 for vegetable sales last year."
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> *Bodhika Sarku, Banglachuli, Dang, 14 October 2024*

Therefore, based on the control groups' response FEST's "people-led" approach has empowered those people to identify their strengths, differentiate between "needs and wants", use local resources to ensure sustainability of initiatives they led, which included opportunities to improve their livelihoods as well. This which is different with non-control groups, where respondents mostly depend on externally provided resources and increase the nature of "dependency". The respondents from those groups have reported less improvements in access to the opportunities, and if access they have less sustainability of those initiatives, including opportunities to improve their livelihoods. Therefore, by facilitating self-reliance and practical skill development through FEST approach different stages (Figure: 4). it has enabled control group participants to access different resources, establish business, control financial decisions, and engage in different income-generational activities, creating a foundation for sustainable empowerment.

2. Empowerment in Decision-Making

The other indicator, this study tries to explore, and compare is how FEST has empowered women and marginalized groups in decision-making process. Batliwala S(1993) defines power as having two central aspects-control over resources (physical, human, intellectual, financial and the self), and control over ideological belief, values and attitudes. "Empowerment is the process of enhancing the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes(WorldBank,2024). Therefore, if power means control, then empowerment thus is the process of gaining control on different aspects, including decision-making.

Table 3: Decision making parameters comparison between control and non-control groups

Parameters	FEST Control	FEST non-control
Decision making level in HHs	67.9%	40 %
Meaningful participation in Community Level	80.8%	53.7%
Key position holders in different community-based mechanisms	28.3%	12.9%

Therefore, this study tries to see different aspects(Table 3) of "decision-making "capacity of interviewed people: decision making level in household, meaningful participation in community-level and key position holders in community groups. Based on these questionnaires, when asked with the respondents from both groups > 58% respondents felt that they had greater influence over decision making level, compared to 35.5% in non-control groups.

It was found that 67.9% of the control group participants have control decision making level in HHs, whereas 40% of non-control group participants have it. When looking at the parameter, 80.8% of FEST control groups have shown their meaningful participation in community level , whereas 53.7% of non-control have influence on it. In addition to this, 28.3% of control groups have led different community level mechanisms, whereas 12.9% of non-control groups have leading them.

The initial parameter that is taken under consideration was "decision making level in household". Therefore, while exploring about why this difference is experienced, it is identified that FEST approach through its different strategic steps and processes (Figure :2) has helped increase the agency of participants of FEST control group to stand against deeply rooted patriarchal norms and values and caste-based discriminations that are highly found in many districts of Nepal including Dang and Jajarkot .

The findings indicate that groups practicing the FEST approach have engaged in different process-based activities to address their limitations through targeted, need-based capacity building initiatives at different levels. These initiatives have helped participants to identify their own problems and develop context-specific solutions effectively. As a result, group members , particularly women responded that significant change in their confidence and ability is experienced, so that they are able to negotiate household roles. This resulting in their meaningful contribution to different household decisions like children's education, health-related expenditures, and livelihood investments.

When looking at another parameter of "meaningful participation in community-level", the study tries to focus on how women and marginalized groups are able to show their engagement effectively in different community-level decisions making process. According to the experiences shared by participants in the control group, the "facilitation" process within the FEST approach played a crucial role in helping them recognize their own strengths and weaknesses. This process provided the necessary support to transform their weaknesses into strengths, ultimately boosting their self-confidence. The 3-5 years of process-driven mentorship served as a powerful tool for empowerment, enabling participants to actively and meaningfully engage in various forums, including community meetings, local government planning processes, resource

> "In a remote village of Jajarkot " Shivalaya", the local of a proper road isolated community resulting in increase their burdens. Tired of these hardships, the women-led community group of Shivalaya , identified road construction as a priority during a facilitated meeting. Contributing their labor and securing partial funds of NPR 1,25,000 from local government, together with other local villagers, they successfully constructed the road. As a result of around a month-long work, the new road connected the village to another main road, easing their right to mobility."
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> *Paschim Jajarkot Bikas Samaj, Shivalaya, Jajarkot, 22 October 2024*

management committees, and diverse social organizations. The FEST approach has proven effective in ensuring that the voices of socially excluded individuals are heard and given serious consideration.

According to the participants, the participatory facilitation techniques include dialogue and consensus-building, which helps them to identify their needs and priorities effectively, and as a result their self-confidence has increased. Another important contribution that has been identified is women and marginalized groups such as people from Dalits and Indigenous groups leading different community development initiatives like road construction, pond construction, local health post construction and so on. As per the participants from both districts, they have completed more than 125 such local initiatives under their leadership, contributing to their labor and even through accessing local government resources. These successful initiatives completed by these community groups reflect the power of collective action and collaboration using local resources, turning a divided, struggling community into a united force for change.

The last parameter was "key position holder" in community groups, as holding a key position led to have influential role and that results to make influential decisions. Out of total interviewed participants, 89% from the FEST control groups were women and out of them 78% were leading the FEST groups, whereas 28.7% of the women are in decision-making position in other grassroot organizations like community forest coordination committee, community forest user groups, school management committees and even in local government entities. The participants attribute to all those leadership training and skill development programs such as Community Group Strengthening Training(CGST), Community Facilitation Training(CFT) , Community Organization Strengthening Training(COST), which they have been introduced throughout the different stages of process to equip them with the confidence and tools necessary to take on influential positions.
"In Dang, women from FEST control groups were elected to leadership roles in community forest user groups and school committees, where they actively contributed to policy development and resource allocation"(Participants, KII, 11 October 2024)

3. Reduce discrimination and harmful practices
Discrimination and harmful practices deeply rooted in gender, caste, ethnicity, and social hierarchies remain critical challenges in Nepal, perpetuating inequality, restricting access to resources, and undermining the well-being of marginalized groups (UNDP, 2020). Practices such as gender-based violence, child marriage, dowry, and caste-based discrimination are driven by deeply entrenched social norms, unequal power structures, and limited access to education and economic opportunities (Gurung, Pradhan & Shakya,2020).

Gender equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) frameworks have gained traction in addressing these issues, emphasizing the empowerment of marginalized groups and the transformation of discriminatory norms (UNDP,2020). Therefore, this section elaborates more on how FEST has impact on reducing discrimination and harmful practices against women and marginalized groups.

This study found that FEST's participatory methodology has enhanced the confidence, agency, and decision-making capacity of women and marginalized communities. By creating safe spaces for dialogue, FEST has found to be providing a common avenue individual to voice their concerns, promoting a sense of ownership and autonomy among the community group members practicing FEST approach. Women and marginalized people trained under the FEST approach said that they have greater involvement in household and community level decision-making, with over 70% in both districts indicating they could influence key decisions, compared to 47.4% in non-control groups. In addition to this, by integrating livelihood programs, this approach has promoted economic empowerment, enabling women to contribute to household income and challenge traditional roles, thereby reducing financial dependency and associated discrimination.

In other hand when the participants were asked about impact of FEST in reducing harmful practices, it is found that the approach has significantly

> *"Caste-based discrimination has been practiced highly in Dang and Jajarkot districts of Nepal, which has resulted in long divided communities excluding Dalits from public spaces and silencing marginalized voices. Through the FEST approach, Community Groups facilitated open discussion and used participatory discussion tool "**CODE**" to address social issues and problems through the facilitation process through posing problem. In Dangisaran, Dang and Chedagadha, Jajarkot districts, members formed a common forum for equal representation and organized symbolic events, like inter-caste meals, to challenge discriminatory norms, Similarly, marginalized groups were invited to lead community rituals, community groups programs and initiatives, fostering inclusivity and unity. These efforts, supported by problem posing tool called "CODE", regular dialogue and capacity building, dismantled discriminatory practices and transformed divided communities into collaborative spaces where all castes work together."*
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> *Participants from Dang and Jajarkot, FGDs 16 & 23 October 2024*

contributed to reducing these practices, especially child marriage, and caste-based discrimination, through its major focus on facilitating "CODE", community awareness and critical dialogue. For such in Jajarkot, 89% of the participants responded to a reduction in child marriages and caste-based discrimination. They attribute this positive change to the process-led approach, which actively involved them in problem analysis through "CODE" and "facilitation". This approach has been instrumental in helping participants collectively recognize the harmful impacts of these practices. Working together in groups has become a key component in identifying existing community issues and exploring potential solutions.

Moreover, according to the respondent the FEST approach has created a common forum to empower women and marginalized communities by ensuring their meaningful participation from the initial stage of formation of groups through listening survey to learning skills such as problem analysis, facilitation, action planning, and leadership. These skills along with increased interactions within their communities and with those outside their communities give them increased capacity to solve their problems, to set vision, and to plan and implement solutions (SHEP & ICCO Netherland, 2016).
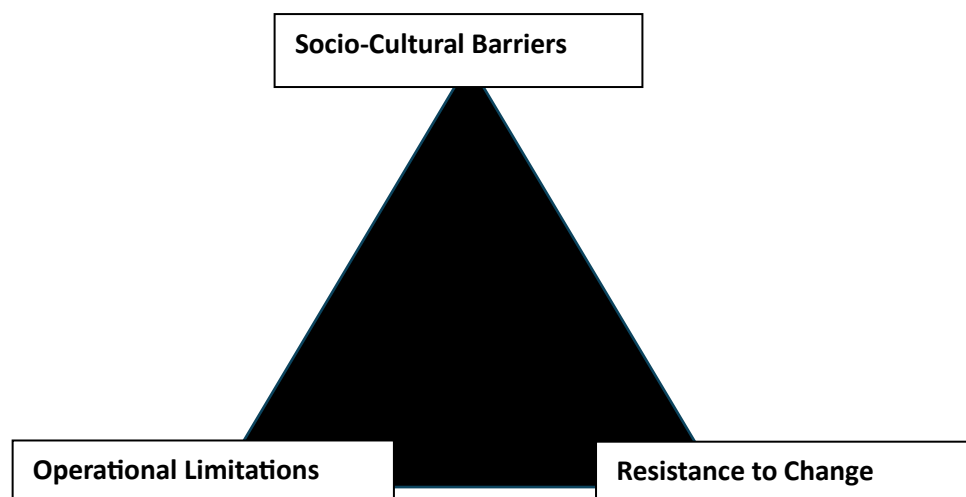
According to respondents, the FEST approach has been instrumental in enabling them to recognize that certain long-standing practices within their community constitute social problems. When asked about the distinctiveness of this approach, respondents highlighted that the process fosters awareness and facilitates the identification of potential solutions through participatory methods. This participatory engagement is identified as a key factor in the reduction of social problems within the community groups implementing the FEST approach.

Challenges

The implementation of the FEST approach in the Dang and Jajarkot districts of Nepal has demonstrated significant potential in advancing Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI). However, the approach faces few challenges that can somehow hold back its effectiveness and sustainability factors.

An unintended aspect of the community groups was the significantly large percentage of women involved in the groups and organizations. About 89% of the total members of all the community groups from Dang and Jajarkot are women. Among them 78% have a woman in leadership position. In the groups,47% are from Janajatis background (Indigenous nationalities), 20% are from Dalit background and remaining 33% are from Brahmin/Chettri cast groups which tend to be socially privileged but may be underprivileged class dur to other factors. The large presence of women offers the space and opportunity to be empowered, practice their voice and build their leadership abilities. However, building groups and organizations mostly comprising of women may not necessarily assist in holistic community building and contribute towards the practice of deliberative democracy as this leaves out a large section of the community building and contribute towards the practice of deliberative and debates. However, the respondents also shared that this has also led to a stereotyping of their community group as a women's group only representing particular women's interests and concerns and not representing the entire community.

Therefore, based on the response from the respondents three different dimensions of challenges are identified(Figure:3)

Socio-Cultural Barriers: The deeply rooted socio-cultural norms, particularly those rooted in patriarchy and caste hierarchies, present significant challenges to promoting inclusivity. FEST approach is primarily focused on engaging women, and most marginalized groups such as Dalits and Indigenous, which is a challenge for overcoming community resistance to changes in traditional roles and power dynamics. Even though the FEST approach and its process has different strategies to empower them resulting in levelling up in their self-confidence and resilience capacity, they often encounter opposition when asserting their rights or participating in decision-making, adding complexity to achieving meaningful social change.

Operational Limitations: The FEST is an entire process-led approach which is focused community people's empowerment through facilitation. The participatory nature of FEST required the needs of high level of facilitation skills and community trust. FEST is a time-intensive process-led approach complete within 3-5 years of period, by ensuring participatory methodology through trust building, creating a sense of ownership, and developing sustainable empowerment initiatives through the use of local resources. Therefore, the time-intensive nature of this approach can be a limitation in contexts where quick results are expected, especially for short term initiatives and addressing immediate crises. In addition to this, the approach promotes self-reliance by encouraging communities to utilize local resources, but it may not always address the immediate needs of the group. The reliance on local resources has limited the scope of some interventions, as some communities seems to lack adequate resources or economic capacity to sustain empowerment efforts without external support.

Resistance to Change: Resistance to change has been identified as a crucial challenge for the effectiveness of the FEST approach in enhancing GESI in Dang and Jajarkot districts. While FEST approach has "facilitation for empowerment" as its central component, but the social and cultural norms and values, shaped by patriarchal and caste-based hierarchies, maintaining traditional roles and power structures, making it a bit difficult for marginalized groups, especially Dalits and Indigenous women, to ensure their rights or take part in decision-making. Although, this approach focuses on challenging these norms through critical reflection, problem analysis through CODE and other participatory engagements, but sometimes these kinds of efforts can result in provoking resistance from those who view these changes as threats to those established social structures.

The participants from both the districts have shared their experiences of how men, as an important stakeholder in the GESI process, sometimes hesitate to show their engagement in different community development initiatives driven by the FEST approach. Likewise, women and marginalized individuals who assume leadership or decision-making roles often face criticism, or exclusion from their communities, underestimate their confidence and participation. Other different genders than women, who are also a crucial stakeholder in gender equality, are sometimes reluctant to participate in activities that challenge their traditional roles, thereby limiting the overall impact of the FEST approach.

Conclusion

The finding of this study indicates that the FEST approach has significantly improved access to opportunities, decision-making and empowerment for women and marginalized groups in Dang and Jajarkot districts of Nepal. The FEST approach's targeted interventions, including community groups strengthening, capacity-building, and participatory tools for problem analysis such as "CODE," have led to increase in access to resources, economic independence, and decision-making power. As mentioned above in the analysis, over 65% of individuals in the FEST control groups have said they have improved access to services and opportunities, compared to 43% in non-control groups, demonstrating the effectiveness of the approach in addressing the barriers of information, knowledge and empowerment that traditionally limit these groups' opportunities.

In addition to this, the FEST approach has played very important role in empowering women and marginalized groups in decision-making processes, both within households and at the community level. Over 70% of respondents from the FEST control groups felt more empowered to play an influential role in decision-making, which in contrast to the 47.4% from non-control groups. Through focusing on increase in analysis capacity, resilience, self-reliance, skills development, and sustainable livelihoods, FEST has enabled women and marginalized groups to challenge patriarchal and caste-based norms, which helps them gain greater agency in both household and community decisions.

In terms of reducing discrimination and harmful practices, the FEST approach has effectively implemented a collective effort to challenge deeply rooted discriminative social values and norms. The increased level of self-confidence and participation of women and marginalized groups in community-level decisions and leadership roles have contributed to the reduction of harmful practices such as child marriage and caste-based discrimination. The approach's compulsory participatory methodologies, from identifying the most marginalized individuals to bringing them together in an inclusive forum for empowerment, have created a common platform for marginalized voices to speak up. This process, therefore, increases inclusive dialogue, promotes equality, and helps participants to become empowered agents of social change.

Despite the positive side, there are still few challenges remaining, particularly challenging and overcoming those deep-rooted social, cultural and political barriers, addressing different limitations, and dealing with resistance to change. The FEST approach, while transformative, requires time, trust building, and local resource mobilization, which can be difficult in contexts where immediate results are expected. Resistance from traditional power structures, especially patriarchal norms, remains a significant challenge, and efforts to engage all community members, including men, need to be strengthened to ensure broader societal transformation.

The finding of study , hence concluded with the note that the FEST approach through its process-led approach and diversified methodologies ,intertwined with each other has been a greater approach to enhance Gender Equality and Social Inclusion from multiple aspects such as : increasing problem analysis, self-esteem, agency power, resilience capacity, decision making power, leadership capacity of women and marginalized communities.

This comparative study also found that members of FEST control groups, despite receiving no fundings from external donors, are actively engaged in community development initiatives. But the situation is different for non-control groups, where many initiatives remain incomplete due to lack of funding. One example from the study area is adult literacy classes which have been discontinued due to lack of funding in the non-control areas, but same initiative is still ongoing even without facilitators receiving renumeration. When asked about their motivation, participants credited the process of problem posing and self-reflection as key factors driving their spirit of volunteerism, motivating them to move forward and contribute meaningfully to their communities.

Therefore, as mentioned by Robert Chamber in his "Whose Reality Counts? Putting the First Last.", the FEST approach has not only built the confidence of marginalized individuals but also create a sense of ownership and accountability within communities. Hence this approach has made substantial progress in enhancing GESI in Dang and Jajarkot. However, continuous adaptation and innovation are necessary to address the challenges identified. A sustained dialogue, further engagement of local facilitators, and addressing socio-cultural barriers will be key to ensuring the long-term sustainability and impact of the approach in achieving transformative social change.

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