

*Review*

## **Equity in higher education of Nepal**

**Yogendra Gandhari**

Department of Education, Faculty of Development Studies, Kathmandu University, Dhulikhel 45200, Nepal.

Received 18 January, 2021, Accepted 25 March, 2021

**University education enables people to have better socio-economic return, engage in critical reflection of political affairs, social practices, and inequalities which subsequently strengthens democracy. The educational opportunities for disadvantaged people help them to break the vicious cycle of poverty, marginalization, and discrimination by enabling them to improve the social and economic status. The Government of Nepal has enacted the National Higher Education (HE) Policy, but it lags ensuring equitable opportunities for the marginalized community, particularly the Dalit community. Despite the constitutional commitment to provide equitable opportunities for educational development, Dalits who comprise above 13% population have been facing multitudes of exclusion in HE opportunities. Venanzi's social exclusion perspective has been used to analyze the underrepresentation of Dalits in HE. The ethnocentrism-historically developed ethnic perspective manifested by the National Code of Conduct of Nepal in 1854; the discursive formation-micro-stories that explained the derogatory origin of Dalits and the hegemonic discourse-subtle form of power perpetrated by non-Dalit in system implementation curtail Dalit's equitable participation in HE. Consequently, Dalits fail to move upward to the socioeconomic status which has impacted the overall development of the country. Mass advocacy and awareness campaign to deconstruct hierarchy-based caste system, data/evidence-based gender and social inclusion policy, increased participation of Dalits in decision-making positions, exploration of caste-related issues through periodic academic research and enactment of subsequent actions, inclusion of Dalit-related issues in HE curriculum, and arranging alternative education for geographically excluded Dalit community may enable Dalits to get HE.**

**Key words:** Equity, higher education, social exclusion, historicity, Dalit.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Education has always been one of the key focuses of development strategy because education is undoubtedly a key tool to achieve human prosperity and wellbeing. The Sustainable Development Goal (SDG), building on

the achievement of the Millennium Development Goal (MDG), has also integrated education among its 17 goals. The SDG in its fourth goal seeks to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote

E-mail: [ygandhari@gmail.com](mailto:ygandhari@gmail.com).

Author(s) agree that this article remain permanently open access under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

lifelong learning opportunities for all" (United Nations, 2021). Equity in education means an equal opportunity for all students to achieve similar level of academic achievement, psychological development, and social wellbeing irrespective of their socio-economic background (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2018) such as class, caste, gender, geography, language, religion, etc. Equity in education has multiple dimensions, as outlined earlier, related to socio-economic status. This paper particularly focuses on the analysis of caste-based system of Nepal which has a significant impact to the students from Dalit community in accessing and achieving cognitive domain in formal education and has become one of the key barriers in achieving quality and equitable education in Nepal.

The national census 2011 shows an estimated population of Dalits about 13.6%; however, Dalit organizations and researchers claim their population above 20% (International Dalit Solidarity Network, 2020). The constitution of Nepal in its Article 18-Right to equality, Article 24-Right against untouchability and discrimination, Article 31-Rights to education and Article 40-Rights of Dalit has secured equal and equitable access to opportunities offered by the state. Article 31 has ensured free and compulsory basic education, and free secondary education for every citizen. Article 40 has further mandated free higher education for Dalits with scholarship. However, there is an underrepresentation of Dalits in both school and university education. Due to the impingement caste-based hierarchy and its subsequent oppression, Dalits fail to enhance educational advancement. Hence, Dalit students have a lower enrollment rate, higher repetition rate in school education (Chalaune, 2020).

Chalaune further explains that Dalit children are higher in number among out of school children. Bhatta et al. (2008) highlight the existence of caste-based exclusionary practices at primary and secondary education. Bhatta et al. (2008) further contend that social exclusion has been reflected in children's schooling, particularly to Dalits because of engrained discriminatory beliefs based on religion, socio-cultural norms, and values. There is about 4.2% drop out from primary and secondary education and one third is from Dalit, only 4% Dalit children graduate to HE (Centre of Education and Human Resource Development (CEHRD), 2019). This has subsequently led to underrepresentation of Dalit students in higher education (HE) in Nepal.

The SDG goal 4 believes that education accelerates the socio-economic activity of human beings and contributes significantly to eradicate poverty globally which is a key challenge of the 21st century. With the onset of the twentieth century, two key premises led to increasing global attention to HE in development

approaches.

First, the high socio-economic return is not possible by the primary and secondary graduates only but needs to be substantiated by the HE graduates, and inclusive higher education is essential to ensure the participation and contribution of all, irrespective of their differences (Reinders et al., 2020).

Second, HE is a driver of "democratic socialization". The higher education system promotes just society through creating a space for critiquing social values that impede equality, personal freedom, and independency thereby contributing strengthening democracy (Post et al., 2004). Aligning with the global affection to HE and with an objective to produce creative, innovative, skilled, and competent manpower for the development of a country, Nepal also manifested attention and invested resources for HE development and promotion. To regularize, systematize, and strengthen HE, the Government of Nepal (GoN) promulgated National Higher Education Policy 2015. The government of Nepal has considered Bachelor's degree and above as higher education.

Despite an increased focus on HE in recent decades, there is a lack of concern and research on the existence of inequalities in HE in terms of access, retention, and its linkage to career outcomes (Reinders et al., 2020). Even the existing literature fails to explain why certain individuals or groups have an unequal representation in HE and how this links with the career outcome. Reinders et al. (2020) further explain only some literature outlining HE inequalities in different stages, from access to career outcome which suggest inclusive HE to focus beyond economic factor and must also include socio-cultural political human factors. The authors discuss the macro-level factors contributing to inequalities in HE that shape students' opportunities and capabilities: (1) economic and infrastructural constraints and (2) position of education in the global market. Least and middle-income countries lack resources and infrastructures that are necessary for HE, which has subsequently hampered access to HE. Likewise, as the global markets are leading HE institutions, due to their profit-prone objectives, the equitable access to and effectiveness of education is always compromised. In developing countries, financial resources, socio-cultural resources, human resources, and political resources play a role in access to HE. Likewise, in Nepal, beyond the economic factors, there are other factors, ranging from historicity to sociocultural context to structural inequality to geography, etc., contributing to existing inequalities in HE. To enable all human resources to use their full potential, HE requires to address inequalities and ease opportunities for all so that the government of Nepal promotes its position to a middle-income country by 2030 (Ministry of Education, 2016).

## PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH

Venanzi (2004) explains that there are three key premises of construction of social exclusion-ethnocentrism, discursive formation, and hegemonic discourse. These premises contribute to construct or maintain social hierarchy based on ethnocentric disposition. Venanzi opines that ethnocentrism is an attribution of social distance, social identification, and the notion of purity based on hegemonic narratives of origin and micro-histories where certain groups of people exclude others assuming their superiority on them. Ethnocentrism is also an approach where people examine the culture of others through the perspective of their own culture and belief. The Code of Conduct 1854 (Muluki Ain 1910) which legitimated caste-based discrimination and untouchability against some caste groups (presently referred to as 'Dalit') perpetuated social categorization and social exclusion among different caste-groups. As a result of entrenched social categorization and impingement, there is caste-based discrimination in academic institutions. There are several Dalit discriminations in Indian academic higher institutions ranging from discrimination by fellow students, administrators, and teachers (Maurya, 2018).

Venanzi highlights the hegemonic discourse of privileged caste groups and explains their perpetuation of subtle power to secure their superiority and domination. As the privileged caste group has led decision-making positions, they tend to perpetuate different discrimination mechanisms to sustain their control over society. Pokharel (2019) asserts elite groups impose force and persuasion to rule minorities and marginalized communities which is a form of subtle power to sustain the hegemony of so-called high caste people. Furthermore, as explained by Mampaye (2017) about the existence of social exclusionary practices in higher education, privileged caste groups misinterpret dominant values of inclusion and mystify the concept of inclusionary practices. Moreover, the high caste people who lead the university/campus management rationalize meritocracy in students' enrollment and deconstruct an opportunity for Dalits to enjoy higher education opportunities.

## CHALLENGES OF EQUITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Besides the constitutional provision of rights to equality, non-discrimination, and equal opportunities in enhancing the potential of all citizen including educational opportunities, Dalit students have inequitable access to and completion of higher education. The data of CBS in 2001 shows that there is under-representation of Dalits in higher education with only 1.4% coverage, out of their

12.77% coverage to the total population. The Dalit community faces multiple social exclusionary practices through the way to higher education such as social discrimination and discouragement, discrimination in academic institutions, economic constraint, etc. Social exclusion is a process of denied access to people to civil, political, and social rights (Madanipour et al., 1998; Walker and Walker, 1997), and infringement of social relationships (Ghimire, 2018). Social exclusion indicates depriving people to enjoy social, political, and civil rights based on their origin-caste, gender, religion, etc. The exclusionary practices that have been substantiated by caste-based discrimination and untouchability in society and institutions due to historically and religiously ingrained caste hierarchy, the disparity in implementation of inclusive policies in organization due to owner's disinterest, provision of merit-based enrollment in higher education due to neo-liberalization and capitalism have created a barrier for Dalits to pursue higher education. Besides, the poor economic status of Dalits also posed challenges to enroll in and complete higher education. These existence of inequalities in higher education has contributed largely to „social and economic mobility“ (OECD, 2018) of Dalits. OECD (2018) outlines that the higher education significantly contributes to change social and economic status between childhood and adulthood. Higher education opportunities enable people to improve their economic status and social status through increasing possibility to engage in high profile job. Furthermore, OECD (2018) also explains that educational opportunities, particularly higher educational opportunities greatly enable students of marginalized community to increase their social and economic disposition. Subsequently, if Dalits are provided an equitable opportunity to enhance higher education, this potentially contributes to break the vicious cycle of poverty, marginalization and discrimination by increasing their social, economic and political access and representation. Therefore, equitable higher education in Dalit community stocks great importance for changing their current socio-economic status and deconstruct caste-based hierarchy which subsequently leads to create more equitable society.

## Historicity

The National Code of Conduct of Nepal 1854 legitimized the caste-based social division and provided a legal foundation of caste-based hierarchy which categorized people into four varnas and 36 castes under four categories, where the Dalit community was placed at the bottom of caste hierarchy (Sharma, 1977). The code provisioned discriminatory social rules is based on the caste-hierarchy. The code limited people's engagement

in different areas such as economic, social, cultural, economic, etc., in terms of their caste affiliation which subsequently led to creating inequality in society. The code banned Dalits to pursue formal education and bound to engage in menial works which subsequently led Dalits to suffer from vicious cycle of marginalization and disempowered. Therefore, because of the historical marginalization of Dalits in the educational and socio-economic discourse, and due to its prolonged effect, there is a minimal representation of Dalits in higher education. As Venanzi (2004) explained, there were lots of micro-histories and stories developed and institutionalized to legitimize the superiority and inferiority of different caste groups. For example, the religious scriptures outlined the derogatory origin of Dalit caste in that they originated from the legs of the god, whereas non-Dalit born from the heads and chests of the same god. This institutionalized a sense of superiority and inferiority in the society which has further developed into habitus and transformed from generation, unknowingly from parents to their children and knowingly. Therefore, the historical social bondage imposed by the legal code has caused educational marginalization of the Dalit community.

### **Socio-Cultural Context**

The financial relationships to the HE has been abundantly discussed in the literature; however, the connection between socio-cultural contexts and HE is scarcely discussed. Educated parents know the importance of HE and subsequently, create a conducive environment for getting access to HE. Educated parents tend to have a strong financial basis to enable their children to get HE. Likewise, educated parents have such a social network that is supportive of their children to know and understand the importance of pursuing HE. It is also evident that the parents with (post) secondary education experience are more likely to create a learning environment for their children to enable acquiring HE (Reinders et al., 2020). As many Dalit parents have lower or no educational attainment and no understanding of the importance of HE, they are less likely to encourage their children to attain higher education.

As a result of habitus as explained by Bourdieu, Nepalese society still instills superstitious beliefs about caste-based hierarchy. Subsequently, there is caste-based discrimination in primary and secondary schools. Furthermore, society has malpractice of criticizing and demotivating Dalits if they step ahead for an educational journey. Both the academic institutions and societies possess a hostile environment for Dalits to build educational advancement. However, there are no such state interventions to transform these barriers into

opportunities.

### **Structural inequality**

The historicity of social exclusion based on caste hierarchy perpetuated systemic inequality in Nepal. So-called high caste people secured key positions in legislative, executive, and judiciary bodies of government which enabled them to sustain social exclusion in different spheres, and education is not the exception. The people, to secure their superiority in government and society, have created a gap in the implementation of national inclusion policy, misinterpreted dominant values of inclusion, and rationalized neoliberalism such as merit-based enrollment in higher education. Subsequently, the marginalized people including Dalit faced hardship to pursue higher education in Nepal.

The Constitution of Nepal 2015, in its Article 40-Rights of Dalit, provisioned free higher education with scholarship. The National Higher Education (HE) Policy 2015 of Nepal has acknowledged the hardships of people from marginalized communities to enter into higher education and graduation (UGC, 2020). The policy, under the problem section, acknowledges that the scholarship schemes for socially and economically backward students are not adequate to increase their participation in higher education. Subsequently, some scholarship provisions for socially and economically marginalized students have been made; however, its implementation part has been contested widely. The policy has been enacted for about five years, but the required inclusion policy programs have not been formulated, neither such programs are implemented. Therefore, social exclusion contributes to the disparity in policy provision and implementation of inclusion programs in higher education. The University Grants Commission (UGC) (2020) manual has remained unvigilant about the scholarship to other Dalit castes and stated to commence such program after the formulation of program implementation guideline. Hence, despite the constitutional provision of free higher education with scholarships for Dalit students, there is an insignificant representation of them in higher education primarily due to the disparity in policy implementation.

Venanzi (2004) contends that the privileged caste group, to secure their superiority, sheer subtle power everywhere. The superior castes that are supposed as elite groups impose force and persuasion to rule minorities and backward communities (Pokharel, 2019). Likewise, the HE policy formulation and HE institutions in Nepal have dominantly been led by non-Dalit and/or elite groups which may have resulted in inadequate provision for Dalit students in higher education. Mampaye (2017) asserts that social exclusionary practices existed in

higher education because of disparity in the implementation of inclusion policy which has foreshadowed the dominant values of inclusion. The leadership and management of academic institutions and government departments led by non-Dalit pierce ambiguity in inclusion policy and merely keep such an agenda as a slogan in a fashionable way. Similarly, non-Dalit academic managers operate HE institutions for economic gain and profit and use merit-based enrollment for quality education which reinforces the social exclusion of Dalit students. In the HE policy and policy of HE institutions, the dominant values as explained by Mampaye can be seen to increase the representation of students from the marginalized community, but its implementation mechanism and structure have been kept unidentified, unrecognized, and unvalued. This is a subtle form of discrimination against citizens who belong to the Dalit community which may sheer another dimension of exclusion.

The underrepresentation of Dalits in decision-making and policy formulation processes has reinforced disparity in HE reform. Few affirmative remedies appear in development discourse to address exclusion and promote inclusion, and the same as in the education sector. The affirmative actions which are limited to redistribution of resources without intervening in structure inequalities (Bawa, 2013) reinforced the system of discrimination and inequality. Therefore, the inclusive policies which have been led by elites created a vicious cycle of exclusion of Dalit communities. Besides, the political marginalization of Dalits has lagged them to influence policy discourse which marginalized them to have a conducive environment for getting into HE and that subsequently compel them to live disempowered, poor, and marginalized.

### **Social exclusion in HE institutions**

Social exclusionary practices in the society lead Dalit to face discrimination in schools which ultimately lead to underrepresentation of Dalit in higher education. Dalit students face caste-based discrimination in classrooms by peers, teachers, and administrators which led them to drop-out of schools (Bishwakarma, 2011). Subsequently, the higher drop-out rate of Dalit students may contribute to the under-representation of Dalit students in higher education. Bhatta et al. (2008) referring to a study in India explain that discriminatory practices in primary and secondary education lead to a lower presence of marginalized social groups.

There is no study of the extent of caste-based discrimination in HE institutions in Nepal. However, there are several Dalit discriminations in Indian academic higher institutions ranging from discrimination by fellow

students, administrators, and teachers (Maurya, 2018). Maurya further elaborates that the extent of discrimination has led Dalit students to drop-out of higher education, and even to commit suicide in Indian HE institutions. As India and Nepal share a common root for caste-based hierarchy, we can argue about the existence of caste-based discrimination in HE institutions of Nepal which has posed a barrier for Dalit people to enter, sustain and complete higher education.

### **Geography**

The geographical location of people signifies the extent of their engagement in formal education (school, campus, university). The children who live far from school have lower enrollment as compared to the children who live nearby (Bishwakarma, 2011). Most Dalits live in a hilly area (Bishwakarma, 2011) with limited access to development opportunities; and subsequently have difficulty to attend formal education. Bhatta et al. (2008) explain that geographical locations contribute significantly to the representation of children in school, and hence the rural areas have a very lower gross enrollment rate in Nepal. Dalits live mostly in remote and hilly areas of Nepal (Bishwakarma, 2011) and have lower enrollment in school. Subsequently, Dalits are less likely to enter into university education. Likewise, in Nepal, all universities have been located in urban areas and hence access to higher education for the Dalit community is difficult.

The HE policy 2015 envisioned to ensure online/digital education for the students who do not have access to universities physically. However, the students having poor schooling and inadequate skills to handle digital technology significantly contribute to the quality educational outcomes (Reinders et al., 2020). In Nepal, such studies and analyses have not been made which may lead to ineffective digital and online education for students that are geographically marginalized.

### **INTERSECTIONALITY WITHIN DALITS RELATING TO HE ACCESS AND OPPORTUNITIES**

Reinders et al. (2020) contend the stronger effect of gender in marginalized and ethnic caste groups in terms of their access to higher education. This means the notion of intersectionality has a strong effect on the access to HE; the more the discrimination the more vulnerable they are to HE opportunities. Among Dalits, women, people with disabilities, economically indigent, and socio-culturally marginalized caste groups are more vulnerable in development opportunities, and so does in the education sector. The people with the aforesaid

attributes are facing an overlapping and independent system of discrimination and hence are facing multitudes of barriers to getting into higher education. For example, a Dalit girl with a disability who lives in the Kalikot district of Nepal (which is a remote district with fewer development opportunities) has merely a dream to pursue higher education in Nepal. Besides, the preference of son over daughter in the Nepalese society due to engrained belief of continuing offspring and existing high rate of economic return people tend to send sons for higher education. As the same trend, belief, and culture reflect in the Dalit community, Dalit daughters are comparatively more vulnerable to get opportunities for higher education than daughters from non-Dalit caste. Therefore, higher education in Nepal has not been able to identify, explore, and address such complex exclusionary issues that have contributed to the underrepresentation of Dalits in higher education. Unless such multidimensional issues of exclusion are identified, the country lacks to utilize the full potential of human resources which subsequently subjugates the development of the country.

## **RELEVANT POLICIES FOR EQUITABLE AND INCLUSIVE HE**

The Constitution of Nepal 2015 under Article 18-Rights to equality, has ensured equal opportunities to the services offered by the state, Article 31-Rights to education has ensured equitable educational opportunities for people with disability and economically indigent, and Article 40-Rights of Dalit has provisioned free higher education with a scholarship. The National Higher HE Policy 2015 of Nepal recognizes the multitudes of challenges that the people from the marginalized groups face accessing HE and completion (UGC, 2020). Subsequently, the policy acknowledges the inadequacy of scholarship provisions to increase access of students to HE from the marginalized communities and implies to mandate additional facilities to increase access from socially and economically indigent students. The policy in its mission, strategy, and working policy has included approaches to increase participation of students from marginalized communities; however, the objective and policy sections of the policy have remained silent in achieving the increased participation of students from the deprived communities. The HE policy is unclear about the implementation of inclusionary programs and based on the previous experiences of disparity in implementing such programs (Martin, 2015); it can be suspected about the execution of inclusionary programs provisioned in the HE policy. Likewise, the University Grants Commission (2020) in its annual report of 2018/2019 outlined that there is a lack of effective policy to increase access of

women, poor, Dalits, underprivileged groups, and areas to HE. The 15th planning of Nepal, with an objective to increase access of students from remote places and the students with a need of alternative access, has sought to expand and reinforce of open university and open and distance education system (National Planning Commission, 2019). However, the planning fails to explain the multitudes of exclusion in HE and the subsequent actions and/or programs to increase access and completion rate of students from the Dalit community. The National Education Policy 2019 has covered multiple dimensions of inclusion, empowerment, capacity development, scholarships up to secondary level education to enhance formal education and technical and vocational education opportunities for the children of the Dalit community (MOEST, 2019). The policy acknowledges the existence of caste-based discrimination including untouchability in the schools and seeks to eliminate such discrimination strengthening governance in the school system. However, the policy has remained silent in ensuring equitable access of Dalit students to HE.

The existing education policies seek to ensure equitable educational access in school-level education. The HE policy 2015 which was specifically formulated for the quality education at the HE level is centered towards regulating the HE institutions of Nepal. The literature suggests accounting political, sociocultural, and other aspects along with economic factors to assess the issues of Dalit access to higher education. However, the existing policies fall behind to include such aspects.

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATION**

The existing educational policies, particularly the HE policy requires substantive substantiation to make it more inclusive and equitable so that the full human resource potential can be utilized to lift Nepal to a middle-income country by 2030 as envisioned by the School Sector Development Plan (SSDP). As historicity, sociocultural context, structural inequality, exclusions in HE institutions, geographical marginalization, and intersectionality are key aspects hindering Dalits to enter higher education and graduation, the policy requires to acknowledge such diversities and needs to incorporate such dimensions for equal and equitable higher education for its citizen.

(1) Deconstruction of historical belief of hierarchy: To deconstruct the historical caste-based belief, the mass advocacy campaign, and empowerment at the community level may contribute significantly. Likewise, the revision and update of Hindu religious manuscripts or mythologies with the respectful origin of all may help to

eradicate the disproportional origin of different castes in the long run. For example, the MOEST/Centre of Education and Human Resource Development (CEHRD) can develop awareness raising audio and video about the caste-based ostracism, legal provision for the caste-based discrimination and broadcast from national television, radio and FM stations. The MOEST can also coordinate with the apex religious body to revise the mythological and disrespectful origin of Dalit.

(2) Gender and Social Inclusion (GESI): Development of GESI policy accounting intersectionality can increase Dalit participation in higher education. The GESI planning and programming requires to be elaborated/explained well with the substantiation of data and evidence. Their subsequent funding resources need to be identified to ensure its effective implementation. The University Grants Commission (UGC) can develop a GESI policy to increase access of Dalits in higher education. This may include allocating certain seats for the enrollment of Dalit students with adequate scholarship provisions. The GESI policy may incorporate a mandatory provision of every higher education institutions to allocate about 13% seats for Dalit students which is proportionate to Dalit population. The UGC may provide grant or assistance to those universities for implementing such practices.

(3) Structural strengthening: The representation of Dalit in decision-making position and policy formulation process may reflect the Dalit agenda in the higher education policy. Besides, if the policy draft committee consists of Dalit expert(s) it may reflect the issues of exclusion in policy document with effective solutions of inclusion. The higher education department of MOEST and/or CEHRD and/or UGC may recruit/designate Dalit for the development and execution of higher education.

(4) Research on Dalit issue: The extent of discrimination in HE institutions in Nepal is almost nil. As India has plenty of evidence of caste-based discrimination in HE institutions, it is more likely to have such issues in Nepal too. Therefore, increased research on Dalit discrimination in HE institutions may provide institutional and structural barriers to attaining equitable access to higher education which may attract subsequent remedies. The UGC and/or MOEST may organize a periodic discussion with the Policy Research Institute (PRI) and ask PRI to conduct research on caste-based discrimination in higher education. Based on research findings, the UGC can develop a policy to redress the access and graduation constraints of Dalits in higher education.

(5) Curriculum revision and update: Education as a key tool to dismantle irrational and man-made beliefs about caste-based hierarchy, the HE curriculum may include „caste-based discrimination as a key barrier“ to development and achieving prosperity and wellbeing of humanity. The MOEST in coordination with the Curriculum Development Center (CDC) may include

caste-based discrimination in the curriculum of higher education which encourages HE students to go deeper about the caste-based issues and it may become helpful in synergizing action against caste-based discrimination in academic institutions and in societies.

(6) Revitalizing open and distant education: Open and distant education system as a strategy to enable every citizen to accessing higher education, the assessment of students“ ability to connect with digital and online education, and subsequent user-friendly system may increase accessibility to HE.

## CONCLUSION

Nepal, like other countries in the world, recognizes higher education as a means of producing skilled, competent, innovative, and proficient human resources for the development of the country. Higher education is also regarded as a way to increase socioeconomic mobility, decrease poverty, and mitigate sociocultural discrimination. Therefore, the Constitution of Nepal 2015, 15th planning, National Education Policy 2019, and National Higher Education Policy 2015 have sought to build on higher education and ensure quality education.

Despite the progress towards achieving quality higher education, as Venanzi (2004) explains about the construction of social exclusion, the existing educational policies have not been able to recognize multitudes of exclusion in society, academic institutions, and even in the systemic structures. The ethnic and caste-based barrier, structural complexities, geographical marginalization, exclusions in HE institutions are the key factors to subjugate the participation of Dalits in higher education.

Furthermore, the notion of intersectionality is almost vacuum in the existing policies. As these aspects are not being well reflected as it persists in policy dimension it attracts in-depth analysis of exclusion in higher education.

To ensure the use of the full potential of every citizen of the country for the developing country, the higher education policy requires ensuring equitable access to HE. For equitable access, the government of Nepal requires to adopt six core strategies: (1) deconstruction of historical notion of caste-based superiority and inferiority through mass advocacy campaigning and empowerment, (2) development of evidence-based GESI policy from the perspective of intersectionality, (3) increase the representation of marginalized people in decision-making positions, (4) research on the extent of institutional and systemic Dalit discrimination and adoption of subsequent remedies, (5) integrating Dalit issues in HE curriculum, and (6) revitalization of the open and distant education system.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

## REFERENCES

- Bawa S (2013). Autonomy and policy independence in Africa: a review of NGO development challenges. *Development in Practice* 23(4):526-536.
- Bhatta P, Adhikari L, Thada M, Rai M (2008). Structures of denial: Student representation in Nepal's higher education. *Studies in Nepali History and Society* 13(2):235-263.
- Bishwakarma MB (2011). Comparative study of Dalit education in Nepal. Available at SSRN 1822163
- Centre of Education and Human Resource Development (CEHRD) (2019). Flash I report 2075 (2018/2019). Government of Nepal: Ministry of Education, Science and Technology.
- Chalaune BS (2020). Dalit students' perceptions and experiences of caste-based discrimination in Nepalese schools. *International Journal of Research –Grant Haalayah* 8(8):147-154.
- Ghimire D (2018). Debates on Social Exclusion and Inclusion in Nepal. *KMC Research Journal* 2(2):49-58.
- International Dalit Solidarity Network (2020). Nepal. <https://idsn.org/countries/nepal/>
- Madanipour A, Cars G, Allen J (1998). *Social Exclusion in European Cities*. London: Jessica Kingsley and Regional Studies Association 301 p.
- Martin C (2015). Proposed higher education policy. *Policy Review Brief* 13:1-6.
- Maurya RK (2018). In their own voices: Experiences of Dalit students in higher education institutions. *International Journal of Multicultural Education* 20(3):17-38.
- Ministry of Education (2016). School sector development plan 2016/17-2022/2023. Kathmandu: Ministry of Education, Government of Nepal.
- Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MOEST) (2019). *Rastriya Sikchya Niti, 2076 [National Education Policy 2019]*.
- National Planning Commission (2019). *Pandhrau Yojana (Arthik Barsha 2076/77-2080/81) [15<sup>th</sup> Planning (Fiscal Year 2019/20-2023/24)]*.
- Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (2018). *Equity in education: Breaking Down Barriers to Social Mobility*.
- Pokharel T (2019). Power approaches to policy-making. *NCC Journal* 4(1):171-180.
- Post D, Clipper L, Enkhbaatar D, Manning A, Riley T, Zaman H (2004). World Bank okays public interest in higher education. *Higher Education* 48(2):213-229.
- Reinders S, Dekker M, Falisse J (2020). Inequalities in higher education in low- and middle-income countries: A scoping review of the literature. *Development Policy Review* <https://doi.org/10.1111/dpr.12535>
- Sharma PR (1977). Caste, social mobility and sanskritization: A study of Nepal's old legal code. *Kailash* 5(4):286-299.
- United Nations (2021). Sustainable development goals.
- University Grants Commission (UGC) (2020). *Rastriya uchcha sikchya niti 2072. Higher Education Policy 2015*.
- University Grants Commission (2020). Annual report 2018/19.
- Venanzi AD (2004). Discursive and social practices in the construction of exclusion: A comparative study. *Electronic Journal of Sociology* 5(1):1-30.
- Walker A, Walker C (1997). *Britain Divided*. London: CPAG.