

# Gender first

## Rebranding inclusion in Nepal

Lynn Bennett

In the early 2000s, as the Maoist insurgency became more intense, journalists, scholars and the development community increasingly cited social exclusion as the 'root cause' of the conflict – specifically the systematic denial of economic resources and cultural recognition to women, Dalits ('low caste'), Janajatis (indigenous groups) and Madhesis (from the Tarai plains).

This was broadly consistent with the Maoists' own narrative that called on excluded communities to join them in overthrowing the 'feudal elite' that had oppressed them for centuries. Many Nepali rights- and identity-based organisations had themselves been raising issues of social inclusion since the first People's Movement of 1990, which restored multi-party democracy to Nepal.

The Nepali Government too recognised problems of exclusion and underdevelopment, even as the war was continuing. The National Planning Commission (NPC), the government institution charged with developing strategic plans that prioritise and articulate national development goals and coordinate the work of the sectoral ministries to achieve them, identified social exclusion as one of four main causes of poverty in its 2003 Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper.

The NPC was also highly supportive of the 'Gender and Social Exclusion Assessment', a major piece of analytical work undertaken by a team of Nepali and international researchers with support from the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and the World Bank. It was published in summary form in 2006 as *Unequal Citizens: Gender, Caste and Ethnic Exclusion in Nepal*.

The report documented the sharp differentials in poverty, welfare outcomes and governance participation between various excluded groups and the traditionally dominant 'high-caste' hill Hindus. It also called for the government to 'incorporate an inclusion lens into its planning, budget

allocation and monitoring processes to ensure full access for women, Dalits and Janajatis in all core government services and development programmes'.

### Post-war politics and incentivising inclusion

During the period following the second People's Movement in April 2006 and the negotiations for the *Comprehensive Peace Accord* later that year, part of the political settlement was consensus on the need to restructure the state and society to be more inclusive. At that point, no one was sure how much power the Maoists – or the marginalised groups they had championed – really had, but their demands clearly had to be taken seriously in order to support the peace process.

Once in government, however, the Maoists (whose senior leaders are themselves from the traditionally dominant groups) quickly began to reveal their own weaknesses – through corruption and failure to produce visible improvements in the lives of the poor: the 'peace dividend'. Given the fact that the development bureaucracy charged with implementing the promised changes was run almost entirely by the same dominant elite, this failure is not surprising.

Neither the Maoists, the traditional parties nor the development partners have recognised the need to incentivise inclusion through all levels of the bureaucracy, and to identify and support sincere advocates for the broader inclusion agenda among the traditional political elite.

It did not help that unrealistic demands were made by historically excluded groups unfamiliar with the concepts and mechanisms of representative democracy. In both the first and second constituent assemblies, opportunities to articulate and debate the core issues of recognition and voice for Nepal's diverse minority groups were missed, or indeed actively avoided, by the Maoists and the traditional parties. Federalism and whether it would be based on identity or economic viability became the proxy issue that blurred the real options for restructuring the state and society at a deeper level.

Over time, the simple persistence of the status quoists undermined the Maoists' already tottering credibility and reduced their ability to mobilise their rural supporters. When the cantoned Peoples' Liberation Army was finally disbanded (rather than moving in large numbers into the national army at all levels as the Maoists had hoped), the Maoists' bargaining power dropped precipitously. They were forced to move from revolutionary to coalition politics. Since then, especially after the second Constituent Assembly elections, the traditional 'upper-caste' hill Hindu political elite has reasserted itself. Partly in response to the perceived insult of having been labelled 'other' in the electoral law, they have self-identified as a separate indigenous ethnic group, the Khas Arya, and the centre-right political parties they control are today dominant once again.

As the traditional political forces have regained power, there has been pushback against the concept of social inclusion, a concept they label as a foreign construct that has promoted ethnic politics and identity-based federalism, thus threatening Nepali national integrity and undermining its 'social harmony'. Ranking officials in the government have criticised certain high-profile donor efforts to support excluded groups, and some projects were even forced to shut down.

A prominent example is the fate of the Janajati Empowerment Programme, a DFID-supported capacity-building project for the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN), to reach excluded indigenous groups with development and empowerment programmes. But NEFIN's core agenda centred on securing ethnic federalism in the new constitution, and so it ignored DFID's request to refrain from participating in strikes or *bandhs* – a common form of anti-government protest for activists groups across South Asia. The government felt that by supporting an activist group like NEFIN, DFID was taking sides on a critical political issue. In the end, DFID (and other donors) withdrew support to NEFIN, but its relations with the government remained strained for several years and, after having been an early pioneer, it has remained very cautious on inclusion, shifting

most of its efforts to supporting gender equality, which is not perceived as 'political'.

Meanwhile, the government, facing pressure to show progress on the development front, continued to seek donor support even though such funding often came with requirements to address issues of exclusion. Indeed, few politicians or public servants wish to appear hostile to the idea of equity and social justice and, at a personal level, many educated members of the elite feel considerable ambivalence about the salience of caste, ethnic, regional and gender hierarchies, which they see as incompatible with their own modern democratic ideals of equality between all citizens.

### **Re-branding inclusion: gender first**

What seems to have happened in the face of this discomfort and the need to keep the development business going in post-conflict Nepal is an unspoken 'rebranding' of the 'inclusion lens' to place an emphasis on gender – reflecting the configuration of the Gender and Social Exclusion Assessment of 2006.

Through low-key, working-level partnerships between the government, donors and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the inclusion/exclusion framework has been reconfigured into the Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) approach. This involves a number of steps to be applied to government periodic plans, policy development and programme design, as follows:

1. systematically identify the excluded and formal and informal barriers that different excluded groups may face in getting access to the programmes, services or rights;
2. design and put into place mechanisms to overcome these barriers; and
3. establish a system to monitor outcomes for different excluded groups and continuously make necessary design modifications if systematic disparities persist.

By now, the use of the GESI approach is impressively widespread. With the support of different development partners, the government has developed GESI guidelines for a number of sectors and ministries. The NPC even devoted a whole chapter of the first Three-Year Interim Plan (2007/08 to 2009/10) to a GESI analysis of the major excluded groups. Donor agencies and NGOs have also conducted GESI audits of their own operations to try to ensure that their project design processes and internal policies are sensitive to the constraints faced by different groups and that their hiring practices bring in a staff that reflects Nepal's diversity.



**Figure 1: the excluded**

Economically excluded	The poor of all Castes Ethnicities Locations Genders
Socially excluded (specific issue of exclusion)	Women Dalits Adivasi Janajatis Madhesis Muslims People with disabilities People from geographically remote areas Sexual and gender minorities

Putting gender rather than caste, ethnicity or regional identity up front seems to have helped to make the GESI approach more familiar and less threatening. Government staff at all levels are used to donor concerns about gender mainstreaming since it has been part of development discourse in Nepal for more than 30 years. Donors, too, have strong mandates from headquarters on gender and feel more confident of their grasp of gender issues than they do about issues like untouchability or ethnic identity that have been highly politicised.

Another aspect of GESI is that it includes not only identity-based groups, but also the poor from all groups, including the politically dominant group (see Figure 1). Since there are large numbers of poor Bahun and Chhetri families – especially in the far west – it was important to look at deprivation based on economic status as well as social identity.

The GESI approach can be seen as an expansion of gender mainstreaming. The core idea is that government services and rights should be equally accessible to everyone. Instead of relying on special targeted programmes to reach the poor and the excluded, it is more efficient and equitable to make sure that mainstream programmes and projects are designed and implemented to reach all citizens.

In order to achieve this, the team designing such a policy or programme has to be aware of the power relations – between men and women and between members of different caste or ethnic groups or religions – and able to assess how the constraints inherent in these relationships may block access for members of non-dominant groups. For example, where schooling is given only in the dominant Nepali language, a Madhesi girl in the Tarai or a Tamang (an indigenous ethnic group) boy in the hills may well face serious barriers to a meaningful education even though the government is committed to ‘education for all’.

### Impact

At the moment, Nepal is the only country where the GESI approach has been adopted at the government level.

Besides a robust toolkit of guidelines at the project, programme and sectoral levels, guidance on institution-level GESI audits and a number of assessment and progress reports and evaluations are available along with trained GESI staff and a much larger group of GESI-sensitised staff at all levels across more than six ministries. There is even a self-formed National Association of GESI Trainers and Practitioners with experience working all across rural Nepal. The approach seems to be a practical way to work with government (still predominantly composed of the traditionally dominant groups and men) in a post-conflict setting to address the highly charged issue of social exclusion.

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Development partners in Nepal are also working together to support the GESI approach in their own internal policies and structures as well as in their support to government programmes. A voluntary group that began in 2005 as the Social Inclusion Action Group became one of the thematic groups under the International Donor Coordination Group, and in 2015 renamed itself the GESI Working Group. After a series of consultations in districts, ministries and with a range of NGOs, the GESI Working Group has come up with a common framework document that explains why the GESI approach is important in Nepal, defines key terms and lays out the process for operationalising GESI at the policy and programme levels. It further presents a ‘road map’ of activities to build capacity and improve the measurement of GESI outcomes.

Yet, this rebranding effort could still fail to achieve its ultimate purpose. There is some danger that the very thing that made GESI broadly acceptable to government – gender

mainstreaming – may be what ends up limiting its ability to bring meaningful change for other groups. When one reviews the various guidelines in search of solutions for non-gender dimensions of exclusion, these are few and far between. Outcome monitoring data by caste and ethnic group is often less complete than data by gender, leaving critical gaps in the system’s ability to expose shortcomings in these dimensions.

For now, the challenge is to make sure that the ‘Social Inclusion’ part of the GESI approach gets the same attention as the ‘Gender Equality’ dimension. Donor agencies, government ministries and NGOs that want the GESI approach to work for all groups need to keep on doing the patient ground-level work to improve systematic coverage of all the excluded groups. For this, it is necessary to focus on the less political and less controversial elements of the inclusion agenda: helping to build the human capacity and economic opportunities of groups historically affected by discrimination while also working to support good governance and progressive policies across the board.

Although progress on inclusion sometimes seems agonisingly slow and halting, over the last 50 years Nepalis from all social groups have made vast strides in their awareness of international rights regimes and their expectations of equality and voice. This is a one-way street. The traditional political elite seems to have successfully defended the status quo in parts of the new constitution, but as long as the basic framework of representative democracy remains in place and citizens continue to become more educated and aware, over time they will insist on a more inclusive Nepal.

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Lynn Bennett obtained her PhD from Columbia University (1978). She led a three-year research project on the social and economic status of women in Nepal for USAID, published in the 13-volume series, *The Status of Women in Nepal* (1981). She joined the World Bank in 1988, serving as Gender Coordinator and then Director for Social Development in the South Asia Region. She led the joint DFID/World Bank Gender and Social Exclusion Assessment, the summary report of which was published in 2006 as *Unequal Citizens: Gender, Caste and Ethnic Exclusion in Nepal*. A follow-up to the study was published as *Gender and Social Exclusion in Nepal: Update* (2013).