Women Politicians in Gender Equality and Social Inclusion 2015-2024: A Nepalese Paradox

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Abstract

The study tracks progress of the UN Sustainable Development Goals for Nepal 2015-2030 by creating composite indices of gender equality, social inclusion and GESI, and examining the factors affecting their levels of achievement. It builds on the principle of 'leaving no one behind', uses metadata including a rating scale for political leaders' perceptions on strategies, and municipal governments' GESI-related program budgets. The progress in GESI index from 54.3 to 67.8 percent is 'on track' against the lower social norm; the success rate for gender equality is higher than targeted, but the social inclusion is 'off-track' below the targets. The political leaders rated top pro-GESI strategies as: policy, law, governance and accountability; justice delivery; and institution building. The female-led local governments outperform male-led units in terms of pro-GESI program budget shares. So, women's agency can be a better mission to improve the social policies, and transform the gender equality plan into a social justice plan.

Keywords*: Gender Equality Index, Social Inclusion Index, GESI Index, Gender Lenses in Strategies, Congruency Indices, Municipal Governments*

1.   Introduction

The ways to improve gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) through stakeholders' efforts are important concerns in the discourse on justice and development. Many countries such as those in the Nordics significantly improved progress in meeting citizens' basic human needs, enabling citizens and communities to enhance their quality of life and achieve higher potentials. However, some basic tasks due in social progress remain in its measurement, comparison by dimensions, and systems as units of analysis, mainstreaming the excluded populations due to failures in the structures of society or inequality, discrimination, conflicts, etc., at the community levels (Porter 2024 and World Bank 2019). So, the paper deals with the risks of exclusion and the process of GESI and its components in Nepal for 2015-2030.

The *Constitution of Nepal 2015,* National Gender Equality Policy (NGEP) 2019, and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2030 accord high priority to GESI. For example, the Constitution *Article 42* guarantees the right to social justice; *Article 43* guarantees the right to social security as a fundamental right for the poor and vulnerable citizens: indigent citizens, single women, citizens with disabilities, children, and tribes on the verge of extinction. However, there is a lack of an integrated social protection policy. So, the sectoral policies try to bridge the gaps in their respective areas (NITI Foundation 2019). In this context, the NGEP has a mission to 'maintain gender equality through economic and social transformation by ensuring substantive and meaningful participation of women in all sectors' and has four specific objectives for it. However, its strategies miss the equitable inclusion desires of

women of all social identities, income statuses, geographical locations, and lifecycle-related vulnerabilities, which need attention.

Baselines, Targets and Gaps

Nepal suffers from uneven development of institutions in social justice, social security, and gender policy. For example, the 16th National Plan's chapter on 'Gender Equality, Social Justice, and Inclusive Society' includes the baseline values and targets of the gender empowerment measure (GEM) indices and gender development indices (GDI), but has little on empowerment in social, economic, and political aspects, say, the social empowerment index (SEI) (Aryal and Bhatia 2024). This Plan's targets on GDI, GEM, and SEI are below the SDG plan, and there is a lack of composite indicators for the GESI variables to track their overall progress. The political system plans to increase women's representation in the country from 36.3 to 41.7 percent during 2023-2029, but it falls short in telling how the rise of female politicians contributes to social integration and justice in society.

Objectives and Approach

The study aims to enhance the agency of women politicians in streamlining the population and development activities for the excluded groups with specific objectives as: (i) Construct a composite gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) index and track its progress in the SDG plan 2015-2030; (ii) Compare the roles played by men and women political leaders in policy, program, budget allocation, human resources, and institutions for social development, and GESI; and (iii) Based on the findings, recommend suggestions for a strategic plan on GESI.

The study proceeds with a hypothesis that the progress in the GESI index is similar to the SDG plan target, and contributions of male/female agencies to GESI are similar. Its conceptual framework builds on the principle of 'Leave No One Behind' by applying the mixed methods and metadata approach.

2.   Literature on Leaving No One Behind

The principle of LNOB is about mainstreaming the excluded people into social progress. First, the state system needs to remove the barriers for excluded people in their participation and access to resources and opportunities through the legal structures, policies, and institutions. Second, it is necessary to eliminate the exclusion risk factors for people and to counteract social prejudices for cultivating their solidarity and participation in society (ILO 2024, World Bank 2017, Labonte et al. 2011). The LNOB underlines that the state mechanism producing social transformations has three pillars: people as heterogenous identity, power and voice; sociocultural institutions and organizations as makers of the rules of the game and its players; and assets, capabilities, and opportunities as reproducers of the unequal entitlements (Maier et al., 2009). That is, we need to enter from three domains as people, institutions and assets for social inclusion.

The Asian Development Bank (2023) characterizes the population at risk of exclusion into seven groups, and recommends implementing the GESI action plans with two priorities: (i) Addressing remaining poverty and reducing inequalities with human capital, social protection, and employment; and (ii) accelerating progress in gender equality with women's economic empowerment, human development, decision-making and leadership, time poverty, and resilience to external shocks (ADB 2023). For India, NITI Aayog (2022) sought to develop a

new and more holistic measure of human dignity at 'minimum economic cost for a household to fulfill eight basic needs using an integrated approach and holistic development, coordination and convergence across different agencies, partnership and co-opting of multiple agencies, assured set of services, and awareness of government schemes and policies.
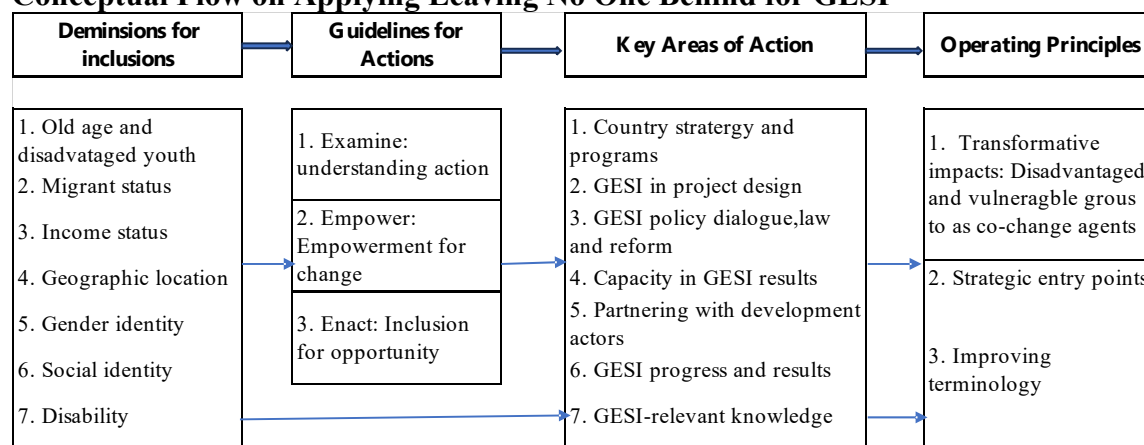
In Nepal, Das et al. (2014) prepared a multi-dimensional Nepal Social Inclusion Index (NSII) to measure 'the process of ensuring the fullest participation of all individuals in all spheres of life'. It estimated the NSII as 0.58 for 2011, and suggested six dimensions: social, economic, political, cultural, gender, and social cohesion/ solidarity. Gurung (2019) emphasized looking through the lens of the 'structural history' and argued that the Indigenous peoples, Terai people, and occupational caste groups are historically excluded from mainstream social and political life. GoN et al. (2023) emphasize a 'whole society approach' to address the intersecting vulnerabilities to ensure that women, men, girls, and boys, in all their diversity, have equal access to economic, labor, and social rights. Pradhan et al. (2023) sought to reach the 'furthest behind' by developing LNOB Agenda 2030 by addressing five exclusion dimensions: social discrimination; spatial disadvantage; socio-economic status; governance; and shocks and fragility/ vulnerability on the ethnic, caste, and similar populations. Thus, the literature suggests to treat issues of GESI holistically and to specify institutions to deliver, monitor, and evaluate.

3.   Linking the Social Identity, Barriers, Actions, and Principles

The study framework has four pillars for GESI: deprived population, guidelines for actions, key areas of action, and operating principles for transformative change (Ref. **Fig. 4 .1,** row 1). In column 1, we emphasize the factors of exclusion due to the intersectionality of hostile conditions concerning the seven population groups such as gender, social identity and so on. For breaking the barriers, column 2 poses three questions such as examine, empower and enact. The seven key areas of action in column 3 deal with diagnostics, planning, and investment. Lastly, we have three operating principles which require that the disadvantaged and vulnerable groups should be proactive co-change agents, entries should be strategic, and programs should be evidence-based.

Figure 4.1:
Conceptual Flow on Applying Leaving No One Behind for GESI

Deminsions for inclusions	Guidelines for Actions	Key Areas of Action	Operating Principles
1. Old age and disadvataged youth 2. Migrant status 3. Income status 4. Geographic location 5. Gender identity 6. Social identity 7. Disability	1. Examine: understanding action 2. Empower: Empowerment for change 3. Enact: Inclusion for opportunity	1. Country stratergy and programs 2. GESI in project design 3. GESI policy dialogue,law and reform 4. Capacity in GESI results 5. Partnering with development actors 6. GESI progress and results 7. GESI-relevant knowledge	1. Transformative impacts: Disadvantaged and vulneragble grous to as co-change agents 2. Strategic entry points 3. Improving terminology

Source: Maier (2009), ADB (2023), Mensah et al. (2022), Herbert (2019), and Authors' Notes

4. Methods for GESI Indices, Rating Scale, and Program Budgets

The methods have three aspects: indexation of GESI, use of rating scales, and congruency of budget shares. The equation for *GESI Index* depends on multiple dimensions like demography, politics, sociology, economics, law in the country, and is an average of seven factors:

$$\text{GESI Index} = \frac{\text{GDI+GEM+Nonpoor (Inc)+Nonpoor (MPI)+ Soc.Protection+Equity+Minority Share}}{7}$$

Where, GESI Index is expressed as a percentage as follows:
1) GDI: Gender Development Index
2) GEM: Gender Empowerment Measures Index
3) Nonpoor (Inc.): Non-poor population based on income per capita per day share
4) Nonpoor (MPI): Nonpoor Population by Multidimensional Poverty Index share
5) Social Protection: Population covered by social protection floor ratio share
6) Equity: Equality of income distribution share (opposite of Gini ratio), and
7) Minority: Congruency Index for Dalit and Muslim in Federal Parliament

The above indicators are the results of national surveys, economic surveys and general elections during 2015-2024. The field survey on ranking strategies for GESI is done by the political representatives in the federal parliament, provincial assembly, municipal Chief and Deputy Chief, and Ward Chairperson. Their total number is 836 out of 9133 seats in the country. The present study contacted 224 leaders, of which it includes 171 complete responses from three provinces: Madhesh, Bagmati, and Karnali. The provinces are selected on a purposive basis such as ecological region, language, religion, municipality type and income level. The questionnaire uses a 10-point rating on eight pre-given strategies for GESI. The case studies refer to the male-/ female-led LLGs, five numbers each, on an eight-program heading related to GESI in fiscal year 2022/23. The LLGs are selected based on availability of data on program budgets in usable formats on the websites, geographical diversity, development levels and ethnicity. The indicators to be watched being the share of GESI-related program budget.

5. Indices of Gender Equality, Social Inclusion, and Achievements

The application of equation for GESI on 11 indicators, as in Table 6.1 below, gives interesting results. As shown in the table/ last row, the SDG plan implied a GESI index benchmark of 54.34 percent as a social norm in 2015, a modest target of 84.65 by 2030, and a pragmatic progression by 2.02 percentage points annually. Its progress by components follows.

Table 6.1
Indicators of Composite GESI Index for Nepal 2015 to 2030

	Indicators of Gender Equality and Social Inclusions	SDG Nos	Unit	Progress			Target		Success (Progress in 2022/ Target for 2025)*100
				2015	2019	2022	2025	2030	
A	*Gender Equality Index (GEI)*	*Pooled*	*%*	*74,6*	*75,9*	*86,3*	*76,3*	*82,5*	*113,1*
1	Gender Development Index	4,7	%	92,1	89,7	88,5	88,5	96,0	100,0
2	Gender Empowerment Measures	5,1	%	57,0	62,0	84,0	64,0	69,0	131,3
B	*Social Exclusion Indicators*								
1	Income Poverty Incidence	1,1	%	23,2	18,7	20,3	17,3	8,0	
2	Multi-dimensional Poverty Index	1,2	%	44,2	28,6	31,0	13,9	6,5	
3	Gini-coefficient for Income	10,1	Coefficeint	0,5	0,3	0,3	0,3	0,2	
4	Dalit and Muslim (D&M) in Parliament	12,2	%	6,8	9,9	9,6	9,6		
C	*Social Inclusion Index (SII)*	*Pooled*	*%*	*46,3*	*58,2*	*60,5*	*73,7*	*85,5*	*82,1*
1	Non-Poor by Income	1,1	%	76,8	81,3	79,7	82,7	92,0	96,4
2	Non-Poor Multidimensionally	1,2	%	55,8	71,4	69,0	82,7	93,5	83,4
3	Social poptection coverage	1,3	%	8,1	17,0	32,0	56,0	80,0	57,1
4	Equality Index of Income	10,1	%	54,0	68,0	70,0	69,0	77,0	101,4
5	Congruency of D&M MPs in Parliament	12,2	%	36,6	53,2	51,6	78,0	85,0	66,2
	Composite GESI Index	*Pooled*	*%*	*54,3*	*63,2*	*67,8*	*74,4*	*84,6*	*91,2*

Source: UNDP (2024) for GDI; NPC (2016, 2018, 2021, 2024) and Aryal and Bhatia (2024) for GEM; NSO (2023) for poverty ratios, and Gini Index; NPC et al. (2023) for MPI; MoF (2024, T. 11-Ra) and NPC (2024, T. 4.6) for social protection; and ECN (2018 and 2023) for minorities representations.

Gender Equality

The gender equality index (GEI), as an average of GDI and GEM, measures the efforts to mainstream gender issues in society. The SDG plan implied to increase GEI from 74.55-82.50 percent during 2015-2030, whereas its progress has already reached 86.25 percent by 2022 (Table 6.1, Sec. A). According to the Ministry of Women, Children and Senior Citizens, the progress in gender equality and women's empowerment are high because the *Constitution of Nepal (2015)* includes fundamental rights with inclusiveness, representation, and social protection (MoWCSC 2020). Nepal's open culture, liberal Hindu/ Buddhist ethos, and high discourse with modern civilizations contribute in improving the GEI.

Social Inclusion

The social inclusion index (SII) approximates the overall equity and justice in society. As placed in Table 6.1, Sec. B & C, firstly, SDG 1 'No Poverty' seeks to increase the proportion of people above the poverty line for income (as US$ 1.9 PPP per capita) or multiple dimensions (health, education and living standards). Second, the population covered by social security and protection floor pertains to the government' transfer payments, insurance, and support to the target populations: senior citizens, single women, disabled, children from specified areas and castes, and endangered tribes. Third, the reduced inequalities deal with equity or fairness in income distribution among the people. Lastly, SDG 10.2: *Political Empowerment Index* target is applicable to the Dalits and Muslims (D&M) who are at least 20 percent of the total population: Dalit 14.6 percent and Muslim 4.9 percent (IDSN 2024). The D&M representation is barely 9.6 % in the parliament: male share is 7.2 percent and female share is 2.7 percent (Ref. **Table 6.2** below). Overall, it is found that the SDG plan implied a progress in SII from 46.3 to 86.5 during 2016-2023, but it barely reached 60.5 by 2022, which requires more effort to fulfill the social justice.

Table 6.2
Dalit Representation by Gender Categories in the Constituent Assembly and Federal Parliament of Nepal 2013 – 2022

	Population Group	Constituent Assembly 2013		Federal Parliament 2017		Federal Parliament 2022	
		Nos	%	Nos	%	Nos	%
1	Total Seat	601	100.0	334	100,0	334	100,0
2	Dalit (D)						
	Total	27	4,5	21	6,3	24	7,2
	Male	16	2,7	16	4,8	21	6,3
	Female	11	1,8	5	1,5	3	0,9
3	Muslim (M)						
	Total	14	2,3	12	3,6	8	2,4
	Male	10	1,7	8	2,4	6	1,8
	Female	4	0,7	4	1,2	2	0,6
4	D&M Female	15	2,5	9	2,7	5	1,5

Source: ECN (2023), FPS (2024), NSO/ CBS (2012 and 2023), NDISN (2024)

Comparing Progress in GEI and SII

The gender equality and social inclusion have progressed with very different initial levels and pace. The achievement levels in GEI and SII are 113.1 and 82.1 percent, respectively. This uneven attainment in GEI and SII falls short in aligning with the Provincial and Local Governance Support Program argument that while gender equality is a goal in itself, it also "significantly contributes to more equal and inclusive development outcomes across sectors" (PLGSP 2021). The disconnects between GEI and SII need further empirical examination.

6.   Prioritizing Strategy, Programs, and Budgets

6.1   Political Leaders' on Ratings and Gender Lenses to Strategies

The results of survey with political leaders on rating the strategies for GESI on a scale from high 10 to low unity can be found in Table 7.1a below. Note that questions 1 & 2 relate to judicial accountability in implementation; questions 3-5 relate to government efficacy; questions 6 & 7 pertain to availability of resources in the system; and last question refers to collaboration between the political agency and civil society organizations (CSOs) and international agencies for GESI.

Table 7.1
Responses of Leaders on Priority Strategies for GESI and Social Progress

	Areas of Leaders' highest contribution/ expertise for GESI and it progress	Mean Score (m)	Standard Deviation (sd)	Responses in the Sample (n)	Standard Error = $(sd/(n)^{0.5})$	t-static for mean = m/ se
1	Policy, law, regulations and directive formulations	7,2	2,2	173	0,17	42,4
2	Judicial work performance	7,3	2,3	169	0,18	41,2
3	Good governance	7,3	2,0	171	0,16	47,1
4	Institution building	6,0	2,3	173	0,18	34,3
5	Development program management	6,9	2,1	173	0,16	43,6
6	Resources mobilization and development	6,5	2,2	170	0,17	37,8
7	Human resources development	6,3	2,2	172	0,17	38,1
8	Coordination with international agencies and sister organizations	4,5	2,7	168	0,21	21,8
	Pooled	6,5	2,3	171	0,2	38,3

In the table, one can find the eight program areas/ strategies for GESI and social progress with their mean ranks, standard deviation, sample size, and t-statics. The mean ratings (m) for the strategies range from 4.5 to 7.3 with a standard deviation 2.3, reflecting substantial diversity depending on issues and respondents' experience, thinking, and circumstances. All the strategies are significant with varying levels of ratings, but the top three pro-GESI strategies are: (i) good governance (m= 7.32), (ii) judicial work performance (m= 7.30), and

(3) policy, law, and regulations and directive formulations (m= 7.18). Thus, political leaders emphasized that Nepal can expedite progress in GESI through government efficacy in programs, judicial case delivery, and making quality laws.

The results also shed light on the gender lens in rating the priorities for GESI, whose mean and test of significance appear in Table 7.2. Compared to male leaders, the female respondents provided a significantly higher mean rating to the strategy as policy, law, regulation, and directive formulations. The other two strategies with notably higher ratings by female leaders are judicial work performance and institution building. Other than these, the strategy rankings for GESI by either gender are similar, which may be due to culture (Hinduism and Buddhism), and egalitarian political values as already indicated.

Table 7.2

Comparative Ranking of GESI-Responsiveness of Strategic Program Areas by Male and Female Political Leaders

	Leaders' Views on Highest Contribution/ Expertise for GESI and Social Progress	Female Response (n1 = 119)		Male Response (n2 = 54)		Difference of Means (m1-m2)	T-Statics for difference of means
		Mean Score (m1)	Standard Deviation (sd)	Mean Score (m2)	Standard Deviation (sd)		
1	Policy, law, regulations, directive formulations	7,3	2,3	6,9	1,9	0,4	1,7
2	Judicial work performance	7,4	2,4	7,1	2,2	0,3	1,3
3	Institution building	6,1	2,4	5,8	2,2	0,3	1,1
4	Average of 5-other strategies	6,3	2,4	6,4	1,9	-0,1	-0,5

Note: For n = 171, the t-values are 1.96 and 1.64 at 95% and 90% level of confidence, respectively.

6.2   Male/ Female-Led Local Governments' Program Budgets for GESI

The municipal government (LLG), led by male or female agencies, may vary in allocating GESI-related program budgets and impact the community and household differently. So Table 7.3 presents the cases of female-/male-led LLGs, their total outlays, budgets for six programs, and share of pro-GESI budgets in the total outlay in 2022/23. First, the average total outlays in female-led LLGs is Rs. 1.4 billion, which is merely 20 percent of the male-led LLGs' total outlay. Second, the female-led LLGs allocated 35.9 percent of their total outlay, while the male-led LLGs allocated 19.8 percent for the GESI-related programs from their total outlay. This difference in gender-wise commitment to GESI-related budget shares is significant at the 95 percent level of confidence. So to say, the women's agency appears as more benevolent for gender equality, inclusive development, and social justice.

Table 7.3

Municipalities Headed by Gender Type and Outlays for GESI-Responsive Programs 2022/23

	Local Level Government Chiefs by Gender	Average outlay (NRs Mn)	Allocation by Major Program Areas in FY 2022/23 (NRs Mn)						Sum of Outlay on Pro-GESI Activites (NRs Mn)	Share of Outlay on Pro-GESI Activites in Total Budget (%)
			Social Development	Law and Justice	Labor & Employ-ment	Poverty Alleviation	Human Resource Dev.	Disaster Management		
1	Women-led LLG	1 411,8	408,5	5,8	5,2	5,5	1,8	161,0	507,3	35,9
2	Men-led LLG	6 878,5	1 190,0	14,8	2,5	44,9	56,4	52,4	1 282,3	19,8
	Pooled LLGs	4 145,2	799,2	10,3	3,8	25,2	29,1	106,7	894,8	27,9

Note: (*) For the difference in budget shares of pro-GESI by LLG leadership, t-statistic calculated is 6.47 against the t-table value of 2.31 at eight degrees of freedom for a 95% confidence level.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study tracked the indices of GESI, gender equality, social inclusion and their factors by building on the principle of 'leave no one behind' and applying the mixed-method approach and metadata in Nepal for 2015-2030. It is found that the level of gender equality index increased from 74.6 to 86.5 percent during 2015-2022, which is higher than its target. Likewise, the level of social inclusion index increased from 46.3 to 60.5 percent, but this is lower than its target. As a result, the GESI index increased midway from 54.3 to 67.8 percent during 2015-2022, which is far behind the target. These contradictions provide important feedback for the SDG 2030 process.

The top three strategies for improving GESI are found as: good governance, judicial work performance, and policy, law, regulations and directive formulations. The women-led LLGs have a smaller scale of revenue-budget yet they allocated 35.9 percent for pro-GESI programs as compared 19.9 percent by the men-led LLGs in 2022/23. This conflict by gender in commitments for GESI has implications for developing better social policies.

The study concludes that the ratio of progress to target for gender equality index exceeds well above 100 percent, which may be due to provisions in the Constitution of Nepal (2015) like women's human rights, feminist socialist republics, ensuing laws and institutions, on one hand, and the women-friendly cultural values in Hinduism, Buddhism and likes, and higher international migrations on the other. Nevertheless, gender equality lacks inclusiveness of the Dalit, Muslim, minorities, and working-class categories; these anomalies are serious concerns. So far as social inclusion is concerned, the ratio of achievement to target is seriously below 100 percent despite the fact that the social norm is already set low; it is a puzzle for a socialism-oriented state system. More investigations are needed to determine whether the women-led LLGs' higher allocations for pro-GESI programs has also caused better transformative improvements among the people facing exclusions.

The study findings and conclusion on the GESI and its components and dimensions lead to recommendations for ways forward as follows: (i) The diverse themes of GESI should be unified to transform gender equality into social inclusion and justice; (ii) The agency for gender equality should be improved in mainstreaming women facing exclusions as per the social identity, income status, geographic location, and occupations, on one hand, and expedite social inclusion on the other; (iii) The top-three strategies for GESI call for equal attention by the states' legislative, executive and judicial branches at all levels of the federation; and (iv) It is necessary to upscale the women-led LLGs for improving the present conditions of GESI, social policies and justice. Such findings, conclusions and recommendations will serve to make a strategic GESI action plan.

Annex-1 List of Municipalities for sample for data on Pro-GESI budget shares:
The female-led LLGs used for GESI-related budget data are: (i) Bharatpur Metropolis, (ii) Hetauda Sub-metropolis, (iii) Hupsekot Rural Municipality, (iv) Birtamod Municipality, and (v) Bhairahawa Municipality. The male-led LLGs used for GESI-related budget data are: (i) Birgunj Metropolis, (ii) Lalitpur Metropolis, (iii) Kharpunath Rural Municipality, (iv) Mahandranagar Municipality, and (v) Kathmandu Metropolis.

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