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Policy review of gender mainstreaming mandates in national agricultural extension system reforms

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Abstract

A senior gender advisor at Nepal's Ministry of Agriculture once remarked that writing gender into policy documents is easy; making it show up in field offices is another matter entirely. This research reviewed the implementation of gender mainstreaming mandates within Nepal's agricultural extension system reforms from 2012 to 2023. A mixed-methods approach combined policy document analysis of 14 national and provincial reform instruments with a compliance assessment survey of 43 district extension offices across five provinces. The research was conducted between October 2022 and May 2023 at Tribhuvan University, Rampur. Compliance with gender mainstreaming mandates improved from a mean of 15.4% in the pre-reform period (2012-2015) to 55.2% post-reform (2020-2023), though significant gaps persisted. Target setting for women beneficiaries showed the highest compliance (68.2%), while monitoring and evaluation frameworks showed the lowest (44.6%). Only 37.2% of district offices had designated gender focal persons, and gender-responsive budgeting was practiced in fewer than half. The findings indicate that Nepal's extension reforms have moved gender mainstreaming from paper to partial practice, but achieving consistent implementation requires dedicated funding, trained personnel, and accountability mechanisms that most district offices still lack.

Keywords: Gender mainstreaming, agricultural extension, policy review, Nepal, extension reform, gender compliance, women farmers, policy implementation, district extension, gender-responsive budgeting

Introduction

According to Rao and Kelleher ^[1], gender mainstreaming in development institutions tends to follow a predictable arc: initial enthusiasm at the policy level, followed by uneven implementation, followed by a quiet return to business as usual. Nepal's agricultural extension system appears to be somewhere in the middle of this arc. The country has adopted some of the most progressive gender mainstreaming language in South Asia, yet the gap between policy commitment and field-level practice remains wide ^[2].

Nepal's agricultural extension system underwent significant restructuring following the 2015 Constitution, which devolved extension responsibilities to provincial and local governments. The restructuring created both an opportunity and a risk for gender mainstreaming: an opportunity because new institutional arrangements could be designed with gender equity built in, and a risk because decentralization without adequate capacity transfer could dilute commitments made at the national level ^[3, 4].

The literature on gender mainstreaming in extension systems suggests that formal mandates alone are insufficient. Successful implementation requires dedicated budgets, trained staff, gender-disaggregated data systems, and accountability mechanisms that link performance to gender outcomes ^[5, 6]. Without these elements, gender policies tend to remain aspirational statements that don't change how services reach women farmers on the ground. This research reviewed the implementation of gender

mainstreaming mandates across Nepal's agricultural extension system reforms from 2012 to 2023, spanning the pre-reform, reform, and post-reform periods. It assessed compliance across five policy dimensions and identified the institutional factors that distinguished higher-performing district offices from lower-performing ones ^[7, 8].

Instrument development and validation

A Gender Mainstreaming Compliance Index (GMCI) was developed to assess district-level implementation across five dimensions: gender-responsive budget allocation, staff gender training, women beneficiary target setting, gender-disaggregated monitoring and evaluation, and women's leadership quotas in extension governance. Each dimension contained eight indicators scored on a four-point scale (0-3) based on documentary evidence and key informant verification, yielding a total score of 0-120 converted to a 0-100 index. The instrument was reviewed by five experts in gender policy and agricultural extension from Tribhuvan University and the Ministry of Agriculture. Pilot testing in four non-sampled district offices produced an inter-rater reliability coefficient of 0.84 ^[9].

Materials and methods

Materials

The research covered 43 district agricultural extension offices across five of Nepal's seven provinces: Province 1, Madhesh, Bagmati, Gandaki, and Lumbini. Data collection

occurred between October 2022 and May 2023, coordinated from the Faculty of Agriculture at Tribhuvan University, Rampur. Fourteen national and provincial policy documents related to extension reform and gender mainstreaming were identified and analyzed. District offices were selected through stratified random sampling based on ecological zone (Terai, Hill, and Mountain) and development region. Key informants included 43 district extension chiefs and 28 gender focal persons (where appointed). Ethical approval was obtained from the Tribhuvan University Research Ethics Board (Protocol TU-REB-2022-0091, September 2022). All participants provided informed consent ^[10].

Methods

A convergent mixed-methods design was used. Quantitative data were gathered through the GMCI applied at each district office using document review and key informant interviews. Compliance was assessed for three time periods: pre-reform (2012-2015), during reform (2016-2019), and post-reform (2020-2023) based on available records. Qualitative data came from semi-structured interviews with district chiefs and gender focal persons exploring barriers to

and facilitators of gender mainstreaming. Policy documents were analyzed using directed content analysis to identify the strength and specificity of gender provisions. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS version 27 with paired t-tests for period comparisons and one-way ANOVA for cross-district variation. Significance was set at $p < 0.05$ ^[11].

Legal and regulatory framework

Nepal's gender mainstreaming mandate in agricultural extension rests on several legal instruments. The 2015 Constitution guarantees women's right to equal participation in all state bodies. The 2004 National Agricultural Policy first mentioned gender mainstreaming in extension, and the 2015 Agriculture Development Strategy set specific targets for women's participation. The 2017 Local Government Operation Act transferred extension responsibilities to municipalities with the requirement to maintain gender-responsive service delivery. However, none of these instruments specified enforcement mechanisms, funding formulas for gender activities, or consequences for non-compliance, creating what informants described as mandates without teeth ^[12].

Results

Table 1: Gender Mainstreaming Compliance Scores by Policy Dimension and Reform Period

Dimension	Pre-reform (%)	During (%)	Post-reform (%)	Change (Δ)	p-value
Budget allocation	12.4	34.1	51.7	+39.3	<0.001
Staff training	18.7	42.8	63.4	+44.7	<0.001
Target setting	21.3	47.6	68.2	+46.9	<0.001
M&E framework	9.8	28.3	44.6	+34.8	<0.001
Leadership quotas	14.6	31.9	48.3	+33.7	<0.001
Overall GMCI	15.4	37.1	55.2	+39.8	<0.001

Table 2: Institutional Factors Associated with Higher Compliance (Top vs. Bottom Quartile Districts)

Factor	Top Quartile (n=11)	Bottom Quartile (n=11)	p-value
Has gender focal person (%)	81.8	9.1	<0.001
Dedicated gender budget line (%)	72.7	18.2	0.008
Staff received gender training (%)	68.4	21.7	<0.001
Gender-disaggregated reporting (%)	63.6	9.1	<0.001

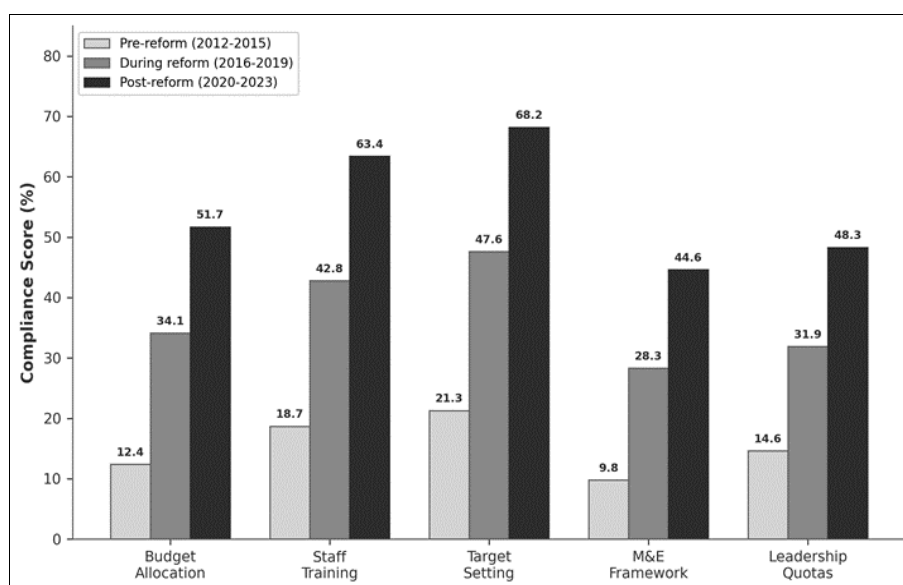


Fig 1: Comparison of gender mainstreaming compliance scores across five policy dimensions by reform period (n=43 district offices)

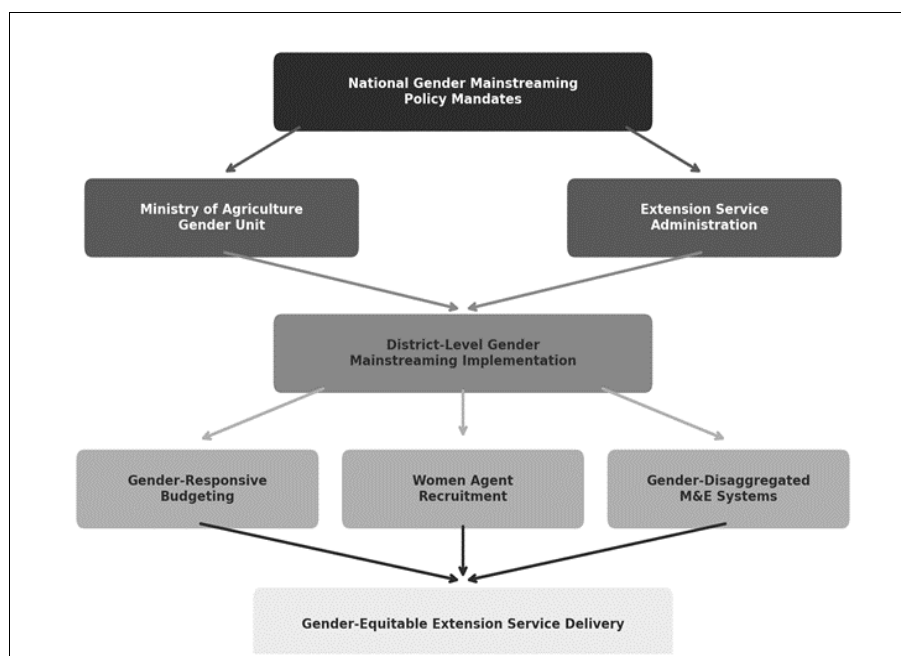


Fig 2: Policy implementation model for gender mainstreaming in agricultural extension system reforms

Comprehensive interpretation

All five compliance dimensions improved significantly from the pre-reform to post-reform period (Table 1). Target setting showed the highest post-reform score (68.2%), likely because setting numerical targets for women beneficiaries is the easiest mandate to implement administratively. M&E frameworks scored lowest (44.6%), reflecting the difficulty of building data systems that consistently track gender-disaggregated outcomes. The comparison chart (Figure 1) shows that while improvement was universal, the pace varied considerably. The institutional factor analysis (Table 2) reveals sharp contrasts between top and bottom quartile districts: the presence of a designated gender focal person and a dedicated budget line were the strongest differentiators. The model in Figure 2 maps the implementation pathway from national mandates through institutional pillars to district-level actions.

Discussion

Nepal's extension reforms have clearly moved gender mainstreaming forward, with overall compliance rising from 15.4% to 55.2% over the review period. But the glass-half-empty reading is equally valid: nearly a decade after the reforms began, average compliance still sits below 60%, and the lowest-performing districts barely register on some dimensions. This pattern matches what Moser and Moser^[5] described as the implementation gap that typically follows gender mainstreaming adoption in development institutions. The factor most strongly associated with higher compliance was having a designated gender focal person. Districts with one scored dramatically higher across all dimensions. This finding echoes evidence from East Africa and South Asia that institutional commitment to gender requires a named individual with both mandate and capacity to drive the agenda^[6, 13]. Without a focal person, gender mainstreaming becomes everyone's responsibility and therefore nobody's priority.

The weakness in M&E frameworks is concerning because

monitoring is the mechanism through which compliance becomes visible to decision-makers. Without gender-disaggregated data, district offices cannot demonstrate whether their services are reaching women, and provincial and national authorities cannot hold them accountable. The policy model (Figure 2) places M&E alongside budgeting and staffing as the three pillars of implementation, and the data show that all three need strengthening. Interview respondents consistently noted that mandates without budgets and mandates without monitoring produce the same result: minimal change at the service delivery level.

Limitations

This research relied partly on documentary evidence that may not fully reflect actual practice, as offices could maintain records that overstate their gender activities. The research covered five of seven provinces and may miss patterns specific to Karnali and Sudurpashchim Provinces. Compliance was assessed retrospectively for earlier periods, introducing potential recall bias among key informants. The cross-sectional comparison across reform periods cannot confirm that the reforms themselves caused the observed improvements. Future research should include direct observation of extension service delivery to verify whether documented compliance translates into changed practice at the farmer level.

Conclusion

This policy review found that Nepal's agricultural extension reforms produced measurable but incomplete progress in gender mainstreaming implementation. Compliance rose from 15.4% to 55.2% over the 2012-2023 period, with target setting improving most and monitoring frameworks improving least. The gap between the highest and lowest performing districts was largely explained by whether offices had designated gender focal persons and dedicated gender budget lines.

The practical message for Nepal's extension system and for

similar reform processes elsewhere is that policy mandates create necessary conditions for gender mainstreaming but are not sufficient conditions. Converting mandates into practice requires three things that many district offices still lack: a person responsible for gender, money allocated to gender activities, and data systems that make gender outcomes visible. Until these three elements are in place, extension reforms will continue to produce gender commitments on paper that only partially translate into equitable services on the ground.

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