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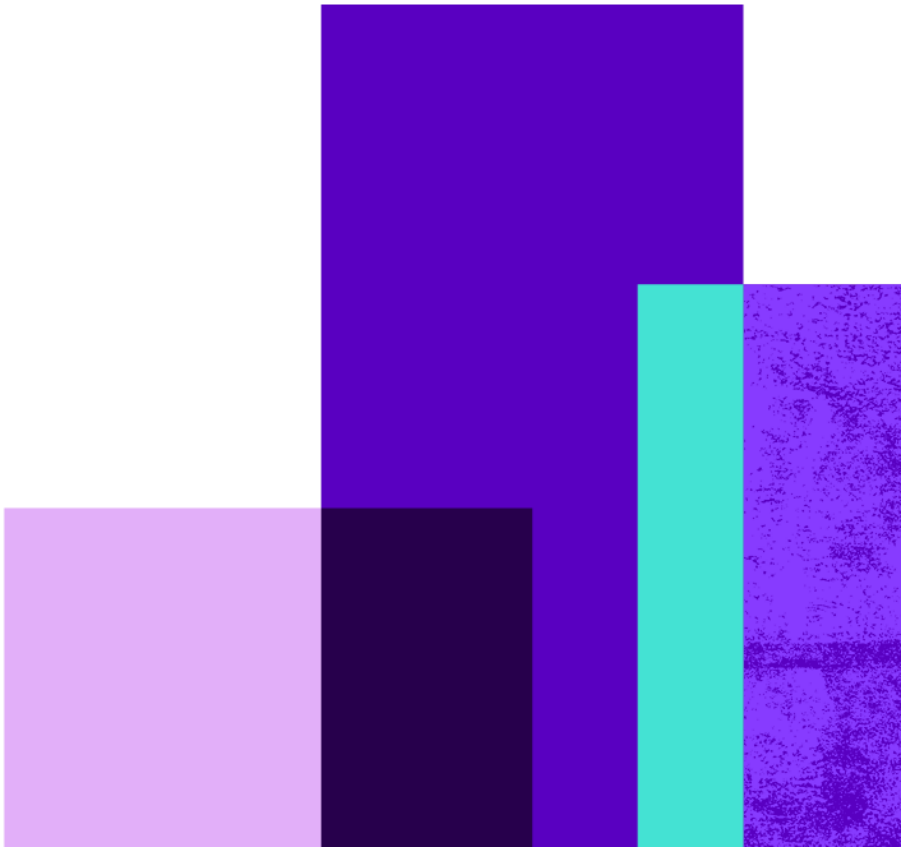
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Cross-arts Gender Analysis in Nepal

Beyond Representation

July 2026

Authors:
Aimun Anis Mir
Yu-Shan Chiu



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About the Commissioner

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Led by women of colour upholding feminist and decolonial values, TSIC provides lived experiences, professional and academic expertise and the ability to push forward inclusive and just growth.

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Commissioner

The British Council

British Council Project Manager

Jonathan Morley

Senior Responsible Owners

Sarah Giles & Nikki Locke

Head of Arts, Nepal

Nhooja Tuladhar

Gender & Inclusion Consultant

Deepa Sundara Rajan

Contributors

Yukta Bajracharya, Laila Jamil, Rustom Mody

Research Team

The Social Investment Consultancy (TSIC)

TSIC Research Lead for the Nepal Study

Aimun Anis Mir

TSIC Overall Research Lead

Yu-Shan Chiu

Peer Reviewer

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Translator and Interpreter

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The arguments expressed herein are those of the authors based on independent research; they are not necessarily those of British Council and do not commit the organisation.

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Glossary

Terms	Definition
Arts and culture sector	Arts and culture sector consists of several arts forms and industries, including visual arts, literature, theatre, dance, music, film, cultural heritage (tangible and intangible), architecture, design, fashion and technology.
Disabled people / Persons with disabilities	Identity-first language remains the preferred approach in the UK. It is deeply connected to the UK's historic disability movement and strongly associated with a social model of disability. It is growing in use internationally, particularly within communities who have connected online. In contrast to person-first advocates who dislike the adjective 'disabled', identity-first advocates note that when someone refers to themselves as a disabled person, they are criticising the society that disables them. They are not using it as a synonym for 'impaired' or describing themselves negatively. For an identity-first advocate, referring to oneself as a 'disabled person' is a way of signalling that society through its structures and attitudes restricts and excludes people like them. However, the people-first language approach has also been very influential and is widely adopted internationally. For example, it is used in the title of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). In some global operational contexts, there may be cultural preferences to use the phrase 'persons with disabilities.' In the context of Latin America, for example, the term 'persons with disabilities' is most frequently used as it conveys this idea when translated to Spanish or Portuguese. It also communicates the concept that the person comes first, then the impairment. (This may refer to physical or other forms of impairment.)
Ethnicity	Ethnicity refers to belonging to a social group that has a shared language, history, culture, codes – sometimes but not always related to religion.
Gender	Gender refers to the socially constructed characteristics by which we define women and men – for example behaviours, roles, and relationships. When individuals or groups do not 'fit' established gender norms they often face stigma, discriminatory practices or social exclusion (World Health Organisation). Gender determines what is expected, allowed and valued in a woman or a man in a given context. It varies from society to society and can be changed.

Gender-diverse	'Gender-diverse is used to refer to persons whose gender identity, including their gender expression, is at odds with what is perceived as being the gender norm in a particular context at a particular point in time, including those who do not place themselves in the male/female binary' (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, n.d.).
Gender identity	Gender identity is an individual's innate sense of their own gender whether male, female or something else. This may or may not correspond with the sex assigned at birth.
Glass ceiling	Artificial impediments and invisible barriers that impede the progression of women and other minorities to top decision-making and managerial positions in an organisation, whether public or private. (European Institute for Gender Equality, n.d.)
Glass cliff	A context in which women and other minorities do reach leadership positions, especially when organisations face difficulties, but are inherently put in risky and precarious conditions (Catalyst, 2024).
Glass walls	Glass walls refer to the subtle, often invisible, gender-based barriers that restrict employees – particularly women and other minorities – to certain occupations, departments, or roles within an organization or a sector, preventing them from moving laterally into more lucrative, authoritative or career-advancing positions.
Intersectionality	Intersectionality is the complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (such as racism, sexism, and classism) combine, overlap, or intersect especially in the experiences of marginalised individuals or groups.
LGBTQIA+	LGBTQIA+ is an abbreviation for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, asexual, and more. This is widely used as an inclusive term, though not uniformly in different global contexts. It brings together markers of sexual orientation and gender identity. We use it here as an umbrella term, at points when these wider intersections are being considered alongside our primary focus on gender.
Marginalised groups/ people	'Marginalised refers to individuals or groups within a given culture, context, and history, at risk of being subjected to multiple discrimination due to the interplay of different personal characteristics or grounds, such as sex, gender, age, ethnicity, religion or belief, health status, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, education or income, or living in various geographic localities. Belonging to such groups or even being perceived to belong to them heightens the risk of inequalities in terms of access to rights and use of services and goods in a variety of domains, such as access to

	education, employment, health, social and housing assistance, protection against domestic or institutional violence, and justice' (European Institute for Gender Equality, n.d.)
Non-binary	Non-binary is an umbrella term for a person who does not identify with the male/female binary. Non-binary people use different words to describe their individual gender identity, e.g. gender fluid, agender or genderqueer, and gender-neutral pronouns such as 'they', 'them' and 'theirs'. Non-binary people may or may not consider themselves to be transgender / trans* and/or intersex. Non-binary can also be a distinct gender identity.
Race	Race is broadly defined and includes racial, ethnic and national origins, nationality, skin colour, tribe and caste.
Sex	Sex refers to the biological and physiological characteristics that define humans as female or male.
Socio-economic background	Socio-economic background refers to an individual's or group's position within a social and economic hierarchy, shaped by factors including income, occupation, education, class, and access to wealth and resources. These factors influence the conditions in which people grow, live, work, and age, and can determine access to opportunities and social mobility. In the arts and culture sector, socio-economic background affects the ability to sustain a creative career, access funding and professional networks, and participate in cultural life, with those from lower socio-economic backgrounds facing compounding barriers that intersect with gender, geography, disability, and other dimensions of inequality.
Transgender	Umbrella term to describe people whose gender identity is different from, or does not sit comfortably with, the sex assigned or recorded for them at birth.

Executive Summary

Nepal's legal framework for gender equity, on paper, is amongst the more progressive in South Asia. The 2015 Constitution enshrines equal rights for women, with parliamentary quotas that have achieved approximately 33.6% women's representation. The 2023 legalisation of same-sex marriage extended recognition to gender-diverse people in ways that remain rare in the region. Yet very little of this has translated into structural change in the arts and culture sector. No dedicated gender equity policy exists for the sector. Existing legal frameworks, including the Sexual Harassment at the Workplace Act (2014) and the Labour Act (2017), assume a formal employer and a registered workplace. Whereas around 49% of Nepal's creative workforce operates entirely outside formal employment (UNESCO, 2026). Consequently, the legal protections do not reach almost half of the people they are designed to serve. In the film sector, for example, the newly passed Film Bill 2081 BS (2026) contains no gender provisions, no standardised contracts, and no worker protections. Where gender-equitable practice has emerged in some arts organisations, it has followed international funder conditionalities rather than domestic policy requirement. This makes it contingent on external priorities rather than embedded in institutional culture.

Nepal's arts and culture sector contains two distinct but overlapping spheres. The first is a mainstream industry structured around commercial production, state institutions, and established arts institutions. The second is an independent and grassroots scene where much of the most politically engaged, gender-conscious work is being made. This report primarily centres people working on the latter, while recognising that the barriers produced by the mainstream reach into the spaces that seek to work outside it. The very artists pushing hardest against social norms are systematically obstructed by the institutions that controls access to resources, recognition, and safety.

This report presents a gender analysis of Nepal's arts and culture sector, with a focus on Film and Performing Arts. These two forms have been selected because they reflect the British Council's arts programming in the country. This report is part of a wider comparative study commissioned by the British Council and conducted by The Social Investment Consultancy (TSIC). The analysis is grounded in an intersectional approach, with particular attention to women and gender-diverse creatives who live in rural regions, have experienced caste and ethnicity-related inequalities, or have lived experience of disability. Grounded in the specific lived experience of our chosen informants, we outline key findings in the research themes co-created with the British Council:

Representation and Progression: Women hold just 12% of registered film workforce roles and 3% of leadership positions as directors, producers, and editors (Adhiraj & Dixit, 2020). This is the outcome of professional associations, grant-making bodies, and production networks built through and for male creatives. The underrepresentation of women in leadership roles actively shapes what younger women entering the sector understand to be possible. It functions as an institutional signal about whose presence the sector is prepared to accommodate. For those women who do advance, the barrier does not disappear. Women in leadership report having their competence routinely questioned in ways their male counterparts do not face. Access to public sector arts bodies also operates through party-political affiliation rather than merit, structurally excluding women who cannot or choose not to engage with those structures.

Access and Participation: The conditions under which most creative work takes place in Nepal are often gender inequitable. They are designed, by default, around practitioners who are men, from dominant caste and/or wealthy background and based in Kathmandu. Women on the other hand consistently report lower pay than male colleagues performing equivalent work, a gap produced by informal, relationship-based hiring mechanisms rather than any transparent process. Securing grants requires fluency in international development frameworks and English-language application processes that function as a class barrier, consolidating funding among those already best positioned to compete. Safety and harassment concerns impose a further structural cost. Women on film sets, particularly remote shoots with all-male crews, describe sustained vigilance as a condition of participation, with no institutional mechanism to protect those who speak out.

These conditions are sharpest where multiple forms of exclusion converge. Dalit women face caste-based discrimination that extends to who is permitted to eat at the same table on set. Disabled creatives are excluded by application forms and venues not designed with them in mind. For rural women, migration to Kathmandu carries additional safety risks and caregiving constraints that make it a fundamentally different proposition than it is for men. This limits participation for rural women as Nepal's creative infrastructure, including training institutions, production houses, post-production facilities, and professional networks, is largely concentrated in Kathmandu.

Social Impact and Advocacy: Women and gender-diverse artists in Nepal are active architects of social change, using film, theatre, street art, and digital platforms to challenge the norms that constrain them and build the solidarity structures. At the heart of this effort are grassroots collectives and feminist networks. Women in Film Nepal, for example, began as an informal Facebook group and has since grown into a community of hundreds, providing a safe space to share experiences of low pay and harassment. Alongside this, Dalit and indigenous artists are using street theatre, graffiti, and documentary film as deliberate acts of reclamation in a sector that has historically rendered them invisible. These networks are not supplementary to Nepal's arts sector; in the regions and communities where formal institutions do not reach, they are the sector. Access to platforms for this advocacy is expanding, but unevenly. Events such as the Women of the World Festival are building inclusion into their design, yet unreliable connectivity, the high cost of devices, and limited digital literacy continue to replicate existing inequalities, excluding the very rural and disabled creatives these platforms are meant to serve.

Skills and Development: The skills gaps most consistently identified by women and gender-diverse creatives are structural rather than artistic: leadership, financial literacy, grant-writing, digital marketing, and the communication tools needed to navigate systems not designed for them. Existing training is predominantly short-term and insufficiently sustained to address career-long exclusion. International exposure through festivals, residencies, and exchanges is among the most effective professional development tools available to artists from marginalised groups. Yet it remains accessible almost exclusively to those already privileged enough to self-fund it.

Recommendations

Advancing gender equality in Nepal's arts and culture sector requires sustained, system-level change that addresses the structural, policy, and institutional gaps this report has identified. We recommend exploring the following actions to progress in this direction:

For International Cultural Institutions and Funders (e.g., British Council):

- Move to multi-year, trust-based funding cycles that prioritise women, gender-diverse led, and grassroots organisations.
- Audit grant-making processes to identify and remove mechanisms that systematically disadvantage under-resourced applicants (women and gender-diverse creatives who face compounding inequalities), including by accepting applications in multiple formats and languages.
- Embed gender equity as a formal criterion in all partnership selection and funding decisions, reviewed annually.
- Apply an intersectional lens to all programme design, implementation, and evaluation. This includes co-designing with artists who have lived experience of intersecting barriers and tracking outcomes that reflect systemic change, not only participation numbers.
- Invest in capacity-building beyond artistic skills, covering leadership, digital marketing, financial literacy, and grant-writing, delivered outside Kathmandu with targeted outreach to Dalit women, rural artists, and artists with disabilities.
- Build the capacity of the wider ecosystem, directing a portion of investment towards the institutions, intermediary organisations, and grassroots networks that sustain creative practice over time.
- Establish dedicated mobility fellowships to enable Dalit, rural, indigenous, and disabled artists to access international festivals, residencies, and exchanges, and actively facilitate connections between Nepali artists and international platforms.
- Require partner organisations to embed gender-focused activities, physical access provisions, and practical support such as childcare as conditions of funding, supported by shared accessibility toolkits and common evaluation frameworks.
- Lead or participate in multi-funder consortia with other international agencies, embassies, and private sector actors to build a pooled fund for gender equity in Nepal's arts sector, enabling longer funding cycles and shared accountability.
- Draw on international networks to connect Nepali arts organisations with good practice on safeguarding and anti-harassment, prioritising partnerships with organisations that actively centre these standards.
- Commission and disseminate research on gender equity in Nepal's arts sector, co-designed with local partners, shared in accessible formats and multiple languages, and distributed through grassroots networks to make evidence a tool for systemic change.

For Government and Public Sector Institutions:

- Develop a standalone gender equity policy for the arts and culture sector, co-designed with women artists, Dalit practitioners, disability arts organisations, and gender-diverse creatives.
- Reform appointment processes for public arts bodies, replacing political affiliation with transparent, merit-based criteria that include mandatory representation targets for gender, caste, and disability.
- Introduce minimum safeguarding standards as a condition of institutional recognition and public funding, with independent reporting channels and enforceable consequences for non-compliance.
- Extend safeguarding protections to freelance and informal creative workers, holding commissioning organisations accountable for minimum conduct standards regardless of employment status.
- Create a dedicated public fund for women and gender-diverse creatives, with eligibility criteria designed to reach rural artists, Dalit practitioners, and disabled artists, delivered through multi-year funding cycles, simplified multilingual applications, and outreach conducted across both virtual and in-person channels beyond Kathmandu.
- Decentralise arts infrastructure and investment beyond Kathmandu as an explicit policy commitment.
- Move beyond one-off skills interventions towards sustained, multi-year capacity-building programmes that support women's and gender-diverse creatives' participation and progression at multiple career stages, designed in consultation with them and tracking outcomes over time.

For Cultural Organisations and Artists Collectives:

- Adopt transparent, gender-responsive governance by reviewing the composition of leadership, boards, and decision-making structures, setting explicit representation targets for women, gender-diverse individuals, Dalit practitioners, disabled artists, and those from outside Kathmandu, and publishing findings annually.
- Formalise anti-harassment policies with independent reporting mechanisms that sit outside the internal networks.
- Embed gender equity as a substantive programming principle, extending representation targets to technical and leadership roles.
- Invest in formal mentorship structures that pair established practitioners with emerging women and gender-diverse creatives from Dalit, indigenous, low-income, and disability backgrounds.
- Treat the documentation and archiving of marginalised artistic practices, including oral histories, performance recordings, and community arts processes, as a deliberate and resourced organisational commitment.

- Build coalitions across feminist, disabled, Dalit-led, and rural practitioner communities, pooling resources and knowledge to strengthen collective advocacy and funding conversations.
- Introduce flexible, accessible working practices, including childcare provisions, accessible venues, and remote participation options, as prerequisites for inclusion.
- Adopt transparent, standardised pay structures that address the pay gap across all roles, including short-term and informal engagements.

1. About the Study

This report on Nepal is part of a broader cross-arts gender analysis exercise commissioned by the British Council and conducted by The Social Investment Consultancy (TSIC). The research draws on elements of the British Council's arts portfolio and the external contexts in which it operates, in order to understand how gendered power structures affect access and progression within the arts and culture sector.

This study examines the specific mechanisms that prevent women and gender-diverse people from fully participating in cultural life. We investigate how structural barriers produce different physical, economic and social realities for women and gender-diverse artists. Crucially, this work is grounded in an intersectional approach, co-created with the British Council, exploring how multiple forms of inequality or disadvantage might affect women and gender-diverse people, with a specific focus on those who:

- Live in rural regions within their respective countries.[1]
- Have experienced caste[2] and ethnicity[3] related inequalities.
- Have lived experience of disability.

Specifically, we aim to answer five research questions, which were co-created with the British Council:

1. **Policies and Commitments:** What policies and programmes in priority regions address gender equality in the arts? What gaps, opportunities, and unmet commitments exist?
2. **Representation and Progression:** What gendered and systemic barriers (including stereotypes and biases) and opportunities do women and gender-diverse artists and creative professionals face? How does gender representation in key art forms including in leadership roles reflect these efforts?
3. **Access and Participation:** What are the major barriers preventing women and gender-diverse individuals from accessing cultural opportunities and participating in the arts and culture sector, including through engagement with the British Council arts programmes?
4. **Social Impact and Advocacy:** How can women and gender-diverse people use arts and culture to address societal issues like climate change, gender equality, and LGBTQIA+ rights? What physical and digital platforms exist for exploring these issues, and how accessible are they?

[1] For the Nepal study, we were unable to engage participants from rural areas. However, the study incorporates findings from a literature review and perspectives from a few research participants who were actively working within rural contexts, ensuring that the findings speak to the different conditions facing creatives outside Kathmandu.

[2] The caste system in Nepal is a hereditary system of social stratification, traditionally organising society into four primary Varnas/castes based on birth and occupation: Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas (traders), and Shudras (labourers). Below this, Dalits (or untouchables) are considered outside the system, facing severe marginalisation. They face systemic exclusion from 'pure' social spaces, such as shared mealtimes, because they are considered 'outcastes' rather than members of the Varna system.

[3] Ethnicity refers to belonging to a social group that has a shared language, history, culture, codes – sometimes but not always related to religion.

5. **Skills and Development:** What skills, profiles, and connections do women and gender-diverse creative professionals need to engage with skills / development programmes effectively (including the British Council's programmes) and further thrive in arts and culture? Are these needs being met in sufficient numbers, and which organisations (e.g., government, NGOs, private sector) are supporting their development?

In addition to gender analysis in Nepal's arts and culture sector, we prioritise two art forms for deeper dive: Film (primary) and Performing Arts (secondary). These art forms are selected as they reflect the British Council's arts programming in the country.

1.1. Research Methodology

Mainstream social science often seeks theories that can be widely applied and relevant. However, as argued by contemporary feminist scholars, such grand theories often function to flatten the diverse and specific realities of women and gender-diverse people, especially as they do not constitute a homogenous group (Lorde, 1984; Jackson & Jones, 1998). In a similar vein, a large sample size leads a researcher to generalise, obscuring critical differences that may be vital to the life of a woman or a gender-diverse person. Rather than focusing on individual traits or universalised data patterns, a rigorous feminist methodology shifts the focus of inquiry toward the institutional and structural power relations that systematically shape these lived experiences (Nochlin, 1971). By engaging deeply with personal and collective memories, researchers utilise the lived experiences and detailed recollections of participants as the foundational data for collective theorising (Haug, 1987; Bertram 1998).

Within this paradigm, attempting to claim universal neutrality or statistical representativeness was not a goal of this study. Instead, we prioritise qualitative methods that can generate deep insights on the systemic barriers that affect who is allowed to thrive in Nepal's arts and culture sector. We honour the feminist understanding that 'the personal is political' (Hanisch, 1969), taking what society often dismisses as isolated 'personal problems' and analysing them to expose systemic oppression. The methodological rigour of this study is established through the depth of the lived and living memories of our key informants: women and gender-diverse artists and/or arts leaders who play an influential role in the arts and culture sector in their countries, regions and/or internationally. They are witnesses, navigators, survivors, challengers, and truth-tellers who endure and refuse the structural barriers to gender equality in the arts and culture sector and beyond. Their stories shine light on this under-explored landscape of structural gender inequality.

As elaborated on below, our research methodology is an intentional practice of ethical care, reciprocity, and reflexivity, as well as a deep awareness of limitations on applying intersectionality and the power dynamics related to structural and systemic gaps around research.

Data Collection Methods

We combined literature review and primary data collection:

- **Literature Review:** To understand the existing evidence base, we reviewed a list of relevant grey and academic literature, government websites, and industry reports, articles and data.

We chose the sources based on their relevance and/or prominence. We aimed to build a thorough understanding of the topic and identify critical information gaps for further exploration through primary research.

- **Key Informant Interviews:** We engaged eight key informants across theatre, film, dance, and visual art. We employed purposive sampling to deliberately centre women and gender-diverse artists actively working towards gender equality. We prioritised those individuals facing compounding inequalities, including disability, caste/ethnic inequality, and rural residence. We also utilised convenience sampling by engaging practitioners within British Council's and TSIC's existing networks.
- **Case Study Interview:** We focused one of the key informant interviews as a case study interview, aiming to contextualise broader findings through a specific individual working in filmmaking, the primary art form we selected for the Nepal study. We wrote this as a short case study in the report, featuring a prominent Nepali filmmaker, director, and producer recognised for her work highlighting caste, gender, and marginalised communities in Nepal. We highlighted how filmmakers in Nepal are combating systemic gender and caste barriers through advocacy-driven storytelling and collective support networks.

The primary research for this study draws on in-depth interviews with eight practitioners across Nepal's arts and culture sector. Rather than treating this as a limitation, the study follows a feminist methodological commitment to situated knowledge, the understanding that deeply contextualised testimony from those most affected by structural inequality generates insight that broad surveys cannot. The eight participants span a wide range of professional experience and career stage: three are aged 25 to 34, four aged 35 to 44, and one aged 55 or above, representing practitioners from the early stages of their careers through to senior leaders with decades of practice. Six identify as women, one as gender-diverse, and one does not share their gender identity. Seven come from communities facing compounding structural disadvantage, including racial and ethnic minorities and Indigenous practitioners. While seven interviewees are based in urban areas (one interviewee prefers not to say), five are working within rural contexts, ensuring that the findings speak to the materially different conditions facing creatives outside Kathmandu. Two of the interviewees are disabled people.

Ethical Care and Reciprocity

To ensure the study aligned with feminist and decolonial values, we adopted three core research principles from the inception:

- **Attention to and Reflection of Different Ways of Knowing and Situated Knowledge:** We recognise that the gendered issues manifest differently across the countries and communities, and that we should not impose a one-size-fits-all approach to the research. Therefore, we used qualitative and narrative-based approaches to capture different ways of knowing.
- **Locally Led Design:** We worked closely with the British Council country-based colleagues to shape the research focuses, plans and approaches. We implemented feedback loops and kept stakeholders up to date with research progress. This collaborative model is part of a broader decolonial lens embedded throughout the entire report, which actively de-centres Eurocentric academic and cultural hierarchies.

- **Power awareness:** We reflected on the research teams and British Council's position of power, as well as potential biases. To overcome this, we aimed to engage a cohort of research participants with a diverse range of characteristics, in line with the intersectional lens of the project, ensuring that different social backgrounds are represented. We also worked with a Peer Review Group comprised of scholars, creatives, advocates and/or policymakers in each region who are actively working at the intersection of gender equality and arts and culture. They enabled us to validate and provide feedback on the research findings.

Our research is also grounded in an ethics of care that recognises the inherent power imbalances between the researcher and participants. By prioritising safeguarding and transparency, we sought to create an environment where participants could speak as experts of their own conditions without fear of institutional reprisal. Central to this was a trauma-informed approach which included careful safeguarding, primarily ensuring that participants remained in total control of their personal and professional boundaries throughout the process.

- **Informed Consent:** We treated informed consent as an ongoing dialogue. Prior to the interview, each participant reviewed a detailed consent form that provided options for anonymity and defined how their narratives would be used. We provided an 'Interview Guide' and a briefing note on key gender concepts to facilitate shared language and prepare participants for discussion topics. We began every interview with a background briefing designed to clarify the research purpose, discuss informed consent, and establish a safe, private space where participants felt empowered to skip questions or withdraw at any time. To maintain accuracy and respect, we returned to each interviewee to confirm the descriptors used to contextualise their quotes and perspectives, ensuring our analysis remains rooted in their self-defined identities while safeguarding them.
- **Equitable Compensation:** Recognising the intellectual and emotional labour involved in sharing lived experiences, we implemented an equitable compensation policy. We offered an honorarium of GBP 50 to interviewees who were self-employed, represented smaller organisations (with an annual turnover lower than GBP 1 million), or would otherwise be unable to participate without remuneration. We discussed eligibility with each participant, with payments processed following the interview. We also remained open to considering compensation requests on a case-by-case basis for those who did not meet standard criteria but expressed a need for support, ensuring that financial barriers did not preclude participation. This payment is a formal acknowledgement of the value of their expertise and the time dedicated to documenting systemic inequalities.
- **Engagement of Participants in Nepali:** During the project's inception, we assessed local needs, including language requirements. For Nepal, we worked with a translator who was fluent in Nepali to support us during the interviews. We also shared key documents, including the interview guide and consent form in Nepali with research participants where requested. This improved language accessibility for participants, so they felt comfortable and empowered to share their narratives in their own terms, which was vital to capturing the nuance of their lived experiences. We acknowledge that we did not offer participation in indigenous and other local languages, potentially replicating linguistic power dynamics in Nepal, where Nepali remains the dominant language in culture and arts.

Analytical Lens and Process

In keeping with feminist commitments to reflexivity[4], the necessity of the researcher examining their own position, privileges, and internalised biases, we recognise that the researcher is never a detached observer (Jackson & Jones, 1998). Instead, our research findings emerge from the relationship between our professional lens – shaped by years of research and evaluation in the arts and culture sector – and the lived experiences of our research participants. We view our analysis as a process where we remain self-aware of our own influence, ensuring that our research methods serve to amplify, rather than overshadow, the insights of the artists themselves.

- **The Researcher's Perspective:** This study is delivered by a team at TSIC, an international women-of-colour-led research firm that specialises in applying feminist and decolonial lenses to global social change projects, including in the arts and culture sector. Our team brings extensive professional experience in evaluating the arts and culture sector and uncovering the invisible systems that determine who can thrive within it. While we are not professional artists, we are deeply connected to the sector both through our professional history of research and evaluation and through our personal engagement in arts and culture activities. We acknowledge that the lead researcher for Nepal has South Asian heritage but remains an outsider to the local Nepal scene. We do not personally live the day-to-day physical and emotional reality of navigating local systems. To bridge the gap between our analytical expertise and local lived experience, we actively prioritised the expertise of our research participants and worked closely with local experts such as British Council's arts team in Nepal throughout the research process. By naming our positionality, we invite the reader to view these findings as a specific, situated contribution.
- **Situated Knowledge:** In our analysis, we prioritise situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988), understanding deep, specific insights from lived experiences and living realities of a targeted group of women and gender-diverse creatives. Our deliberate choice to focus on a small sample allows us to avoid totalising women's experiences and instead tease out the specific social hierarchies that produce inequalities among these particular artists. It also facilitates a reflexive relationship where interviewees are not merely objects of study but theorists of their own conditions. The insights generated in this study serve to identify systemic barriers and policy gaps that are often invisible in larger quantitative data, offering a foundation for future research and programming.
- **Evidence Synthesis:** We wove together the findings from literature and primary data to solidify our analysis. We applied thematic analysis to the primary data, identifying recurring patterns of systemic exclusion, individual resistance and development opportunities. We aimed to theorise the structural challenges and opportunities based on the insights shared by our research participants.

[4] According to Jackson & Jones (1998), *'Feminist theory is not, and has never been, a static phenomenon. […] Diversity and change are interlinked. As feminism has evolved, theorising has taken many different directions and forms. Individual feminists have also changed their views over time and this is evident in the reflexive, self-critical tenor of much feminist work. Feminists are constantly reflecting on their own ideas, changing their stances in response to debates and challenges from other feminists. Hence individual theorists cannot always be pinned down to a single statement of their position, since this is continually being developed and modified.'*

- **Use of Technology and AI:** To streamline our process and enhance efficiency, we utilised Microsoft Teams and Zoom to auto-generate interview transcripts. In cases where we conducted interviews in other languages, we employed Gemini to translate these records into English. During our thematic qualitative analysis, we leveraged NotebookLM, Gemini, and Dovetail's AI insights to identify initial patterns across the large volume of text, and utilised these tools to support the structural framing and drafting of the reports. To prioritise data security, we conducted all AI-supported tasks through enterprise subscriptions, which ensures the models were not trained on our data. Finally, our research team manually verified, refined, and contextualised these outputs to ensure the final analysis remained accurate and grounded in participant nuance.
- **Use of Tense in Writing:** Throughout this report, we use the present tense when quoting or referring to interviewee insights to maintain a sense of immediacy and relevance. This approach treats the participants' lived experiences and professional perspectives as active knowledge that describes the current, ongoing system they live and work in. By framing these voices in the present, we emphasise that the systemic challenges and solutions discussed in the report remain urgent and continue to shape the arts and culture sector today.

Validation and Peer Review

In the validation phase, we incorporated peer reviewing as the core mechanism for independent validation and feedback to ensure the research findings are relevant, nuanced, and safe to share within the local context.

- **Peer Review:** For the overall study, we set up a Peer Review Group, comprising one representative from each of the six global regions and three representatives working internationally, including scholars, creatives, advocates and/or policymakers who work actively at the intersection of gender equality and arts and culture. For the Nepal study, the peer reviewer is Maliha Noorani. The peer reviewer reviewed our draft reports and provided constructive advice that helped inform deeper analysis, strengthen research methods and argumentation, and enhance the quality of the study.

  We adopted a participatory peer review approach. This meant we did not simply ask the peer reviewers to approve or critique our work from a distance. Instead, we saw the peer reviewers as collective sense-makers of the analysis. We engage directly with the peer reviewers. We also organised two Peer Review Group meetings to facilitate direct exchange among the peer reviewers and the research team, aiming to enable collective understanding and connections.

  To acknowledge the expertise and labour involved in this critical review, we also implemented a compensation policy for our peer reviewers, guided by a defined Terms of Reference. For independent practitioners or those representing smaller organisations, we offered an honorarium at a rate of GBP 50 per hour to ensure that the peer review process remained equitable and that financial barriers did not limit the range of expert voices involved in validating the research findings.
- **Review from the British Council:** Each draft report was reviewed at successive stages of the writing and editing process by a dispersed team of British Council experts, including the

Arts team in the focus country, representatives of the Arts Global Programmes and the Research Unit, and specialists in International Development, Gender Policy, and EDI. They provided feedback that helped correct inaccuracies, strengthen argumentation, ensure safeguarding and inform recommendations. We also held a series of internal workshops to collectively reflect on common themes across the studies and explore implications and recommendations.

1.2. Research Limitation

Despite our extensive professional background, we do not claim to hold all the answers or a definitive expertise on Nepal's arts and culture sector. The findings are intentionally situated within the specific lived experiences of the research participants and the context of our selected literature. By acknowledging the boundaries of our inquiry, we avoid making totalising claims and instead provide a mapping of the structural barriers navigated by our research participants. It should also be noted that while this study focuses on Film and Performing Arts, whose organisational infrastructure is generally supported by contemporary festivals, there is an extensive calendar of significant cultural and often religious traditional festivals taking place across Nepal. These fall outside the scope of this research.

Intersectionality

While we prioritise certain forms of compounding inequalities, here outlines the intersectional variables that are constrained within this study:

- **Cisgender Men's Perspectives:** While we intentionally centre the voices of women and gender-diverse practitioners to expose the specificities of marginalisation, we lack representation from cisgender men in this study. We acknowledge that the perspectives of those in dominant gender positions could offer a different lens on how institutional power and patronage operate.
- **Rural and Geographic Divides:** Although we integrate regional voices, the dominant Kathmandu-centric voices among our research participants still influence our analysis. Further investigation is required to map the specific infrastructural gaps (such as the lack of accessible, reliable and safe transport; socio-cultural norms preventing travel; and limited digital connectivity) that dictate how rural artists navigate their relationship with dominant urban centres.
- **Socio-economic Class Barriers:** Though we did not prioritise class as a primary intersectional variable at the design of the study, it emerged as a critical site of compounding inequality throughout the study. Further research is necessary to understand how Nepal's financial, political or social structures might exclude artists from lower-income backgrounds.

Systemic and Institutional Gaps

We identify several overarching constraints that stem from data availability and institutional structures:

- **Gender Disaggregated Data:** We identify a significant lack of gender-disaggregated data within Nepal's arts and culture sector. This 'statistical silence'[5] prevents wider progress on gender inequality (ECLAC, 2022) and reinforces the invisibility of systemic gendered barriers in national policy. While our qualitative findings serve to fill a critical narrative gap, we emphasise that such insights are not a substitute for the institutional accountability that national-level disaggregated data provides. Instead, we emphasise the urgent need for systemic data reform to provide a baseline for national-level progress.
- **Institutional Power Dynamics:** The researchers of this study recognise that the frameworks of social research – and the funding sources that support them – are inextricably linked to historical systems of power, notably patriarchy and colonial legacies, which have long dictated whose knowledge is valued. We acknowledge that this research takes place within the context of British global engagement and its associated history. Research is often commissioned and consumed through a dominant narrative that can inadvertently uphold societal inequities.

  The research team was intentional about creating an accessible, equitable and safe environment for all contributors; however, we recognise the inherent constraints of operating within these institutional boundaries. Despite our commitment to feminist and decolonial values, the structural reality of the commissioning process – where ultimate decision-making often rests with the commissioning organisation – can create friction between local research needs and global institutional requirements.
- **Constraints on Validation:** We acknowledge that the depth of our validation process was restricted by material and resource allocation constraints. While feminist methodologies support an iterative and collaborative validation process – where participants review and refine the final analysis as collective sense-makers – the study's financial scope did not permit this level of extended engagement. Furthermore, conducted within a feminist principle that refuses to extract uncompensated labour, we did not have the means to provide additional honoraria for the time required for participants to review quote selections or full transcripts. Consequently, individual validation was limited to the verification of proposed descriptors, which we invited participants to adjust or approve to ensure accurate contextualisation. The exception was with the individual case study: we intentionally prioritised a review with the case study interviewee, ensuring that their specific story was interpreted accurately and that the narrative felt safe and representative of their lived experience. To mitigate the lack of individual validation, we conducted three cross-country validation workshops with selected global participants to test and refine the emerging cross-cutting themes of the broader eight-country study. We recognise that these constraints create an inherent distance between the researcher's analysis and the participant's expertise and lived experience.
- **Constraints on Knowledge Reciprocity and Mobilisation:** We acknowledge a critical limitation regarding the ownership and dissemination of the research findings. While feminist and decolonial principles prioritise returning knowledge to the practitioners who generated it,

[5] Following Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), we use 'statistical silence' to refer to the failure of statistical systems to generate gender-sensitive and gender-disaggregated information that could make inequalities visible, particularly those related to unpaid care work and gender pay gaps.

the distribution of this report is governed by the commissioner's consent and timelines. This ownership model restricts our ability to engage in knowledge mobilisation – the process of transforming findings into accessible, community-ready resources such as local-language summaries, advocacy toolkits, or creative workshops. This stage of the process will be taken forwards by the British Council, as the commissioner of the research.

- **Action Gap and Institutional Accountability:** Finally, we acknowledge a critical gap regarding the transition from research to action. While this study identifies systemic inequities, the research team holds no authority over the subsequent redistribution of power or resources. There is a risk that research serves to fill knowledge gaps while the material realities of the practitioners and communities who have shared their expertise remain unchanged. We recognise that these communities have long advocated for their own needs; the barrier is often not a lack of research, but a lack of institutional will to practice accountability and take meaningful action. Without a commitment from commissioning bodies, state institutions, and government agencies to move beyond the production of findings, research risks perpetuating an extractive cycle where participants' lived experiences are analysed without a reciprocal change in their professional or social realities.

2. Introduction to Gender Equality in Nepal's Arts and Culture Sector

This section establishes the structural context within which women and gender diverse creatives in Nepal's arts and culture sector work. It begins with Nepal's broader gender equality landscape, examining the gap between the country's constitutional commitments and the conditions that shape women's daily lives. It then turns to the specific position of gender diverse people in Nepal, where legal recognition has advanced faster than social and economic inclusion. The third section situates the arts and culture sector itself, mapping who currently holds power within it and how that power is distributed. The final section examines the policy environment directly governing the sector, tracing what protections exist for practitioners, where those protections fall short, and what sustains the gap between them.

2.1. Gender Equality in Nepal: Legal Frameworks and Lived Realities

Nepal's gender equality landscape shows visible legal ambition, yet it remains gender inequitable in reality. The country's 2015 Constitution enshrines equality and women's rights in explicit terms. Article 18 guarantees equal protection, Article 38 codifies women's rights, and a parliamentary quota secures at least one-third of legislative seats for women, achieving approximately 33.6% representation as of 2026. In March 2026, women's representation at cabinet level reached the constitutional one-third threshold for the first time. Following a cabinet expansion in April 2026, women now hold 37.5% (6 of 16) of ministerial positions, the highest proportion in Nepal's history (The Himalayan Times, 2026; Khabarhub, 2026) Nepal's ratification of CEDAW in 1991 and endorsement of the Beijing Platform for Action in 1995 further anchored these commitments within an international accountability framework. The country's 7th CEDAW Report, reviewed in 2025, alongside the BPfA+30 National Review, drew international acknowledgement of legislative milestones including the Domestic Violence Act (2009) and the National GBV Strategy (2021) (Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, 2025; Government of Nepal, 2024; Rana & Koirala, 2021). Yet the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index places Nepal 125th out of 148 countries in 2025 (World Population Review, 2026). This figure points to persistent structural gaps that legal reform alone has not been able to close.

The distance between legal provision and lived reality is where the substantive challenge lies. The mechanisms sustaining that gap are not incidental. The 2025 Shadow Report submitted by 106 Nepali civil society organisations identifies non-implementation of Concluding Observations as a recurring pattern across nearly every article of the Convention. The report documents how successive CEDAW reporting cycles have returned to the same structural limitations without resolution (Forum for Women, Law and Development, 2025). Central to those challenges is the concentration of power among dominant caste men in political and bureaucratic structures, which continues to prevent wider decision-making access. Limited public awareness of existing legal protections compounds this further, reproducing a cycle of impunity in which rights exist on paper but remain practically inaccessible (Rana and Koirala, 2021).

Gender inequality is most acutely visible in 'economic participation and opportunity', where Nepal scores just 0.460 on the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index, its weakest dimension, against its near gender parity score of 0.966 in 'health and survival' (UN Women, 2024). Economic exclusion, gender-based violence, and early marriage are intertwined to affect a woman's life and participation in the economy. Child marriage remains widespread, with 34.9% of women aged 20 to 24 having married before the age of 18 (UN Women, 2024). Early marriage typically ends or interrupts girls' education, and the consequences carry forward. With limited educational participation, women's formal employment pursuits are also limited. Women's participation in formal employment in Nepal stands at just 26%, compared to 52% for men, a gap that reflects not individual choice, but the accumulated effect of truncated schooling and a labour market structured around those who have had uninterrupted access to it (Alaref et al., 2024). Economic dependence, in turn, is likely to deepen exposure to violence. Gender-based violence affects 11.4% of women aged 15 to 49 annually, a figure that captures reported cases but not the broader conditions of coercion and constraint in which many women live (UNFPA Nepal). Rural women face this compounding most concretely. With a female literacy rate of 39.1% against 67.2% for rural men, the data reflects how geography layers onto gender to produce conditions that are qualitatively different, not just statistically worse (UN Women, 2024). These are not separate statistics but interlocking mechanisms that reproduce disadvantage across generations of women.

Women in rural municipalities are more likely to experience and report gender-based discrimination than their urban counterparts. This geographic disparity is reflected in physical violence rates, which reach 23.8% in rural areas compared to 20.5% in urban settings. These figures are not incidental but represent the deep entrenchment of patriarchal structures in rural communities, where traditional cultural values face fewer institutional challenges and women possess fewer resources to resist them. Education operates as both a lens of visibility and a protective barrier against discrimination. Data indicates that 34% of women with no formal education report physical violence, a figure that drops to fewer than one in ten for those with secondary or higher education. However, these statistics likely underestimate the true prevalence of harm. Women with limited education are more prone to internalising discrimination in their daily life, meaning many experiences are never identified or named as discriminatory. Consequently, formal education does not merely reduce the incidence of discrimination; it raises the threshold at which a woman can articulate and report her experiences (Gupta et al., 2021).

2.2. Gender-Diverse Creatives in Nepal: The Legal-Social Paradox

Nepal occupies a paradoxical position in the regional landscape, possessing one of South Asia's most progressive legal frameworks for gender diversity while the lived reality is of profound marginalisation. This paradox is anchored in a series of landmark judicial victories, beginning with the 2007 Supreme Court ruling in *Sunil Babu Pant v. Nepal Government*, which mandated the recognition of a 'third gender' category and established rights to citizenship and anti-discrimination protections. These protections were subsequently reinforced by official third-

gender recognition in the 2011 census, constitutional safeguards under Articles 18 and 42 of the 2015 Constitution, and the legalisation of same-sex marriage in December 2023. However, while Nepal is frequently cited internationally as a 'legal beacon' for gender diversity rights in South Asia, this progress remains predominantly judicial. The gap between legislative aspiration and the experiences of gender-diverse individuals remains vast (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

The socio-economic conditions facing gender-diverse individuals reflect this implementation gap. Despite legal protections, the majority of trans individuals are effectively excluded from the formal labour market. This pattern is often driven by pervasive workplace discrimination and a lack of inclusive hiring protocols that penalise those who do not conform to binary gender presentation. A 2021 study of trans women in Kathmandu revealed that 78% of trans women had been denied employment specifically because of their gender identity (Wilson et al., 2021). Formal employers routinely reject applicants whose legal documentation does not match their lived gender expression. This structural barrier that pushes many into high-risk informal sector, including sex work, and begging (Human Rights Watch, 2024). This economic precarity is further compounded by a significant gap between high-level legal commitments and the practical implementation of corrective policy measures. While reservations for marginalised groups exist within the Civil Service Act, a functional quota specifically for gender-diverse individuals has remained rarely implemented in practice (PEFA, 2024).

2.3. The Arts and Culture Sector Baseline

Nepal's arts and culture sector is economically significant, socially dynamic, and structurally informal. The UNESCO Baseline Assessment of Cultural and Creative Industries in the Kathmandu Valley (2026) documents a sector spanning crafts, design, film, gastronomy, literature, media arts, and music. Across these sub-sectors, 49% of practitioners work outside formal employment structures. Enterprise informality is also present, with 12% of businesses operating without registration, rising to 31% in music. Informality is a key feature in the art and culture sector: project-based work, freelance arrangements, and home-based production are the norm. The sector is predominantly youth-driven, with over 84% of respondents under the age of 45. Financial barriers are pervasive, with 55% of enterprises reporting constraints on growth. Kathmandu Valley is the epicentre of Nepal's arts and culture sector, where centuries of cultural heritage intersect with digital transformation and growing commercial momentum. It is also where the structural inequalities shaping who can participate, lead, and sustain a creative career are most clearly visible.

Music, theatre, dance, and fine arts fall under the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation (MoCTCA), which oversees cultural policy, licensing, promotion, and regulation across these artforms. It directly supports institutions including the Nepal Music and Drama Academy, the Nepal Fine Arts Academy, and Nepal Pragya Pratisthan (Nepal Academy. Film, on the other hand, is under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology through the Nepal Film Development Board (FDB).

Established in 2000, the FDB oversees licensing, archiving, and grants for socially oriented and ethnic-language productions (Film Development Board, 2026). FDB comes under the

jurisdiction of the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology. Industry associations including the Film Artistes Association of Nepal (FAAN), the Nepal Film Technician Association (NEFTA), the Nepal Film Producers' Association (NFPA), and the Nepal Motion Pictures Association (NEMPA) collectively represent actors, crew, producers, and exhibitors, mediating between state policy and creative practice (Lens Nepal, 2026). Recent years have marked a turning point commercially and critically. Around 61 Nepali films earned approximately 1.8 billion NPR in 2025, outpacing foreign films for the first time. Festivals, including Nepal International Film Festival (NIFF), the Kathmandu International Mountain Film Festival (KIMFF), and the Film South Asia provide visibility for filmmakers working outside the commercial mainstream filmmaking (Kathmandu International Mountain Film Festival, 2026; Asian Film Festivals, 2025; Singh, 2024). Despite this momentum, functioning cinema screens have fallen from roughly 450 to 160, government investment remains minimal, and the sector relies heavily on international bodies to fill funding gaps (Ray, 2024).

These sector-governing institutions were not built with women in mind and continue to reflect that. Women hold just 12% of film workforce roles and 3% of leadership positions as directors, producers, and editors (Adhiraj and Dixit, 2020). The professional associations and grant-making bodies that structure Nepal's film sector tend to operate through established male networks, where opportunities circulate among those who are already connected. As women are largely excluded from these networks, they are also excluded from the funding, mentorship, and visibility that follow from them (UNESCO, 2026). Consequently, as the sector grows, the benefits accrue to those who were already inside it. Emerging women producers such as Keki Adhikari and Krisha Chaulagain demonstrate what becomes possible when structural access widens, but their visibility points to the exception rather than any systemic shift.

The 2025 box office success of *Boksi Ko Ghar*, produced by and starring Keki Adhikari and directed by Sulakshyan Bharati, shows that audiences will watch films centred on women's stories. The film earned NPR 6.05 crore in its first week, crossed NPR 10 crore within three weeks, and became the highest-grossing film featuring a woman lead in Nepal. The barrier to greater women representation is not lack of demand but access to the decision-making table (Shah, 2025; Dhakal, 2025). When women are excluded from the rooms where projects are funded and approved, stories centred on women's lives are filtered out before they ever reach an audience.

Music, theatre, and dance fall under the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation (MoCTCA), which oversees cultural policy, licensing, promotion, and regulation across these artforms. It directly supports institutions including the Nepal Music and Drama Academy, the Nepal Academy of Fine Arts, and Nepal Pragya Pratishthan. Nepal's performing arts scene is lively and growing, with festivals such as Echoes in the Valley, Jazzmandu, KatJazz, Jamarko Jatra, and Nepal International Theatre Festival positioning Kathmandu as a creative hub in South Asia, drawing international artists and fostering cross-cultural collaboration. Some, notably Echoes in the Valley, have begun incorporating workshops and discussions on royalties, copyright, and intellectual property. These are issues that are otherwise overlooked in Nepal's largely informal music economy (UNESCO, 2026).

Women's participation in theatre has grown, yet the conditions under which that participation happens remain constrained. Social opposition to women performing in public, rooted in community norms and patriarchy, continues to function as an informal barrier that formal policy rarely names, let alone addresses (Gurung, 2011; Thapa, B. B., 2011). Across music and theatre, access to rehearsal spaces, professional networks, and performance opportunities is not distributed on the basis of talent but on the basis of existing relationships (UNESCO, 2026).

The vibrancy of Nepal's performing arts scene is real, but it coexists with the male dominance of professional networks that often determine, at every stage, who gets to be part of it. Funding, mentorship, and career-defining opportunities circulate through relationships built on proximity and loyalty rather than merit, and women and gender-diverse practitioners are structurally less likely to hold those relationships (Adhiraj and Dixit, 2020). The UNESCO Baseline Assessment (2026) reinforces this: women operating informally from home-based workshops are rendered ineligible for loans, export facilitation, and government recognition, because the systems of support were designed around a model of enterprise that excludes them. The result is not simply underrepresentation but the active exclusion of women and gender-diverse creatives from the conditions that make a sustained creative career possible.

2.4. Policies and Commitments in the Art and Culture Sector

No dedicated policy framework exists in Nepal for women or gender-diverse creatives working in the arts. The sector operates within an institutional framework whose primary concerns have historically centred on cultural preservation and heritage promotion rather than gender equity. Technology. Nepal's primary cultural legislation, the National Cultural Policy (2010), centres on the preservation and promotion of tangible and intangible heritage. Gender is not named as a policy priority within it (Shrestha, 2023). The most recent legislative development in the art and culture sector reflects this same absence. Nepal's National Assembly unanimously passed the Film Bill, 2081 BS in February 2026, replacing the Film Act of 1969 and introducing reforms to digital platform licensing, industry certification, and production permissions. These are substantive regulatory changes, but worker protections, standardised contracts, and gender equity provisions are absent from the Bill entirely (The Rising Nepal, 2026). What protection exists for practitioners continues to be drawn from adjacent legal frameworks not designed with the arts sector in mind.

Several frameworks represent meaningful legislative advances in gender equality. The National Civil Code (2017) establishes equal inheritance rights for daughters and sons and prohibits discrimination in wages and social security (Rana and Koirala, 2021). The Sexual Harassment at the Workplace (Prevention) Act (2014) and the National Penal Code (2017) criminalise rape, sex-selective and forced abortions, and trafficking. The criminalisation of marital rape in 2020 and the establishment of one-stop crisis centres mark further progress acknowledged in international reviews (Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, 2025). The Labour Act (2017) prohibits sex-based discrimination, mandates equal pay, and classifies sexual harassment as a terminable offence. The Information Technology Act (2006, amended) criminalises cyberbullying and harassment, with penalties of up to three years imprisonment. However, CEDAW shadow reports have flagged significant limitations: provisions on online

stalking are absent, enforcement in rural areas is poor, and the conviction rate for cyber offences stands at approximately 5% (Forum for Women, Law and Development, 2025). A draft Online GBV Strategy (2025) has been proposed but not yet enacted, leaving meaningful gaps against international standards.

In principle, several of these provisions apply to formal cultural organisations including theatres, galleries, and film production houses that fall within MoCTCA's regulatory remit. In practice, their reach does not extend to the conditions under which most arts work in Nepal actually takes place – the informal economy. MoCTCA's mandate covers licensing and institutional support, but it contains no mechanism for ensuring gender equity within the organisations it oversees or the practitioners it regulates. Artists working freelance, on short-term contracts, or within informal creative networks fall outside these protections entirely. The law's architecture assumes a stable employer-employee relationship that the cultural sector, structured around project-based and precarious labour, does not always provide.

The absence of arts-specific gender policy means equitable inclusion depends on individual goodwill rather than institutional accountability. MoCTCA has the mandate and the institutional reach to address this, yet gender equity remains outside its operational priorities. This is compounded by a near-total absence of sector-specific data on discrimination, harassment, and safeguarding failures. Without disaggregated evidence, neither state actors nor funders can design targeted responses or hold organisations to account. Low awareness of existing legal protections among women and gender-diverse practitioners means that even the frameworks that do exist fail to reach those they are designed to protect (Rana and Koirala, 2021). The gap, in other words, is not only between law and practice but between protection and the people who need it.

The constitutional quota mandating 33% women's representation in state bodies has achieved approximately 33.6% in parliament as of 2026 (UN Women, 2021). This provision does not extend to arts organisations, where inclusion in festival boards or theatre companies is driven by grant conditions or curatorial preference rather than legal obligation. A Dalit theatre artist - with almost 20 years of experience -interviewed for this study noted an indirect normative effect: the existence of legal mandates in the public sphere has made gender equity feel more achievable, even in contexts where it is not formally required. However, where women's inclusion has occurred in arts organisations, it has more often followed funder conditionalities than any domestic policy lever.

Within government arts bodies, this structural inequality is compounded by how resources are allocated. Women creatives interviewed, including a senior visual artist and a senior theatre artist, report that funding decisions are made through personal connections rather than merit, a pattern that disproportionately disadvantages women and marginalised artists who lack access to those networks.

Safeguarding presents a parallel problem. Many academic and cultural institutions have yet to develop internal policies or codes of conduct, and awareness of existing legislation among practitioners remains limited. As one female filmmaker and production house founder based in Nepal interviewed for this study, notes that there remains a critical need for the state and institutions to work together to create safer working environments. The legal foundation exists; the institutional will to build on it should improve.

In the absence of domestic policy or state funding for gender equality in the arts, international development agencies have moved in, making gender an explicit condition of the grants that practitioners now depend on. A female director with a decade of experience interviewed for this study describes the shift as *'actually quite useful'.* Yet the mechanisms through which international funders distribute resources can replicate the hierarchies they seek to dismantle. Grant models that demand complex reporting, institutional infrastructure, and fluency in development language effectively screen out those without existing privilege. A non-binary activist and founder of a communal art space interviewed for this study describes this dynamic directly:

> *'The access to these grants is usually through privilege because who is able to apply for these grants? Who is able to speak the language? Who is able of commit to these frameworks and be able to play it? Usually, the richest people in Nepal get these fundings because they can pull out a beautiful project [proposal], they can word it in the right ways, they can give the right buzzwords. They know what the funder wants to hear.'*

This account identifies a gatekeeping mechanism that operates not through explicit exclusion but through the administrative demands of the application process itself. When funding fluency becomes a prerequisite for access, capital consolidates among those already best positioned to compete for it.

The policy environment in Nepal is further shaped by a political context that our interviewees describe with urgency. The rise of conservative movements internationally and signs of democratic regression within Nepal are seen as direct threats to the rights and visibility of women and gender-diverse people. In a region where patriarchal structures remain deeply embedded, political retreat does not simply slow progress. It actively reinforces the systems that advocates and practitioners have been working to dismantle. This makes the task of embedding rights-based approaches within civil society and arts institutions necessary, ensuring that what has been built is resilient enough to survive shifts in political will.

3. Representation and Progression

This section examines the major systemic and cultural challenges that limit the representation, progression, and access of women and gender-diverse individuals in Nepal's arts and culture sector.

3.1. Underrepresentation of Women in Leadership

Women in Nepal's film industry are systematically excluded from the roles that carry the most creative and financial authority. Only 12% of the registered film workforce are women, and this figure falls to just 3% in leadership positions such as director, producer, or editor (Adhiraj and Dixit, 2020). This pattern reflects structural conditions that actively limit women's entry and progression. An analysis by Docskool and Plan International Nepal (2020) of 47 Nepali films found that only 1 in 17 directors and 1 in 4 producers were women, with women crew members concentrated almost entirely in roles such as hairdressing, makeup, and costume design. Our interviews confirm that this disparity is widely experienced across the sector, with participants identifying the absence of women in leadership positions as both a symptom and a cause of ongoing exclusion.

Access to the most influential positions in Nepal's arts sector is shaped not only by professional merit alone but also by political structures that govern institutional appointment. Interviewees express that while women's representation has grown in non-profit and independent organisations, government-affiliated arts bodies remain largely male-dominated. Furthermore, getting into governmental arts bodies often depends on political affiliation, which many professionals cannot, or choose not to, pursue. This often excludes women who may lack political connections. A senior female visual artist and founder of multiple alternative art collectives in Nepal interviewed for this study, notes about a government body affiliated with arts and culture: *'It is politically controlled, like party politics happens here. You, as an artist, have to somehow belong to one party or the other party to get into certain positions.'* Women who are unwilling or unable to engage with party structures are therefore excluded from the spaces where art and cultural policy are shaped.

For those women who do advance into leadership, reaching a senior position does not guarantee having their authority respected. Interviewees describe a pattern in which women's competence is routinely questioned in ways that their male counterparts do not face. A female theatre director and actor interviewed for this study observes that women's capacities are scrutinised and that derogatory, stereotypical attitudes are common in professional settings. Another senior female visual artist interviewed for this study further highlights how this resistance can escalate beyond the professional. She notes that women who challenge the status quo are frequently targeted: '*When women, particularly women artists and others who are strong and provide clear answers to questions, their sexuality is often used against them. Their sexuality becomes a target, which means they are made uncomfortable, often through sexual harassment*.' This resistance to women's authority has created a glass ceiling effect, where women may secure positions in smaller-budget or independent organisations but encounter intensifying resistance as they move toward the highest levels of larger institutions. This barrier pushes women to continuously prove their right to occupy leadership spaces.

When leadership remains a male-dominated space, younger women often internalise the absence of role models as a sign that such positions are inherently unattainable for them. Because women are so thoroughly locked out of leadership roles in the arts and culture sector through political and institutional mechanisms, younger women entering the sector encounter a landscape in which female leadership is rarely visible. A trained Nepali journalist and film producer with nearly a decade of experience interviewed for this study describes the impact of limited women role models: *'In Nepal, I think there's a lack of role models as well… Women don't see other women in leadership roles, which eventually sort of settles in the head that they can't reach that place.'*

Women in leadership positions, despite having faced similar challenges in their own professional journeys, are '*unable to create space for younger women to advance*,' as the same interviewee continues to explain. This then further limits upward mobility for other younger women.

3.2. Stereotypes and Visibility

Career options for women and gender-diverse creatives in the arts and culture sector in Nepal are frequently limited to traditional, gender-stereotypical jobs due to the gendering of jobs and art forms. This keeps the arts and culture sector workforce segregated and undervalues their contributions. This gendering of jobs and art forms is reinforced by the public perception that studying film is a *'big no-no'* for women's marriage prospects, as a trained Nepali journalist and film producer with nearly a decade of experience interviewed for this study points out.

Even those who overcome this initial barrier remain largely absent from technical production roles. This is driven by the stereotype that women are physically weak for demanding on-set work, often resulting in them being channelled into support roles like costume design and makeup. A director of a small production house interviewed for this study observes this barrier: *'To infiltrate that [notion that women are physically weak] is another sort of big barrier for women film makers'.* This framing is critical because it attributes women's absence from technical roles not to structural barriers but to their own physical limitations.

Lack of women's representation in certain roles is often the result of discriminatory hiring practices. Survey data from the film sector in Kathmandu Valley confirms that hiring operates substantially through personal networks and informal channels (UNESCO, 2026), which means that stereotypes embedded in those networks directly shape who gets access to which roles. The result is a workforce that is not only gender-segregated but one in which that segregation is naturalised as a matter of suitability rather than exclusion. Beyond casting, female characters are typically portrayed as weak, dependent on men, or confined to narrowly defined roles. Women also suffer from age discrimination, where women aged above 35 are particularly marginalised, primarily cast as mothers rather than lead characters (Adhiraj and Dixit, 2020). This is particularly visible through the aesthetic bias and the male gaze present in films and performing arts, where talent is often secondary to appearance. As a female actor and theatre director from an indigenous community with 20 years of experience, interviewed for this study describes: *'Your beauty is given priority, or is looked at from a certain perspective... If you aren't as conventionally beautiful, your talent becomes secondary.*'

Occupations in the arts are gendered, in that professionals are expected to take up certain roles or art forms depending on their gender. People with visual disability are expected to take part in art forms like singing or playing an instrument, in contrast to dancing. For gender-diverse creatives, this stereotyping manifests as societal pressure to confine themselves narrowly to performance arts like acting or dancing. Furthermore, a recent report by UNESCO (2026) highlights that even within these prescribed boundaries, such as film acting, gender-diverse individuals are frequently pigeonholed into stereotypical roles like sex workers, rather than being recognised for their versatility across all creative, technical, or behind-the-scenes fields.

The capacity of women to dedicate time to their profession is impacted by ingrained and gendered societal expectations regarding domestic and caregiving responsibilities. World Bank's research on women's labour force participation in Nepal finds that household chores and lack of trustworthy childcare are among the primary reasons women report not working. Even among working women, reliance on family for childcare, combined with the lack of formal childcare options, remains a significant structural barrier (Alaref et al., 2024). These pressures are particularly acute in the arts and culture sector, where project-based and freelance working patterns (affecting 26% of film sector workers in Kathmandu alone, per UNESCO, 2026) offer none of the formal workplace protections or family-friendly policies that might otherwise mitigate them. When more than a quarter of the film sector workforce operates on project-based contracts with no formal protections, the default design of creative labour can assume workers are free from caregiving responsibilities, which institutionally disqualifies women with caregiving responsibilities.

Since society views women as primary caregivers, families often discourage women from pursuing art, perceiving it as a *'non-respectable job'*, as a trained Nepali journalist and film producer with nearly a decade of experience interviewed for this study asserts. This results in the double duty of unpaid care work, which leaves significantly less time and energy for women's professional creative work than their male colleagues. As one artist and academic interviewed for this study emphasises, providing caregiving support, such as encouraging artists to bring their children and caretakers to residencies, is crucial for women to pursue their artistic development without being held back by domestic duties. Without deliberate institutional accommodation of caregiving responsibilities, the default design of arts sector participation continues to favour those, predominantly men, who are not expected to carry them.

4. Access and Participation

This section highlights the challenges specific to accessing and engaging in the arts and culture sector in Nepal. This includes limited access to resources, professional networks, and working environments that prevent women and gender-diverse creatives from actively engaging in the arts and culture sector.

4.1. Gatekeeping and Unequal Access to Resources

Arts and culture careers in Nepal rely extensively on informal, male-dominated, or elite networks rather than merit alone. Access to jobs, opportunities, and funding is often secured through political connections and existing social capital. As summarised by one director interviewed for this study, access is largely based on *'who knows who and who refers whom'*. The UNESCO Baseline Assessment (2026) corroborates this at the sector level, identifying informal hiring through personal networks as the dominant recruitment mechanism across Nepal's creative industries. Women in the film industry consistently report having less bargaining power than men embedded in established networks, resulting in lower pay for identical work. The male-dominated network thus perpetuates gender inequality in the sector.

This exclusion is compounded by how arts and culture are valued in Nepal's public life. In Nepal, arts and culture are seen as a *'luxury and hobby'* by society instead of a professional pathway, as described by a senior female visual artist and founder of independent contemporary art spaces in Kathmandu, interviewed for this study. This perception often leads to limited public and private investment. Within the existing pool of funds, a significant portion is perceived by our interviewees as *'lost in bureaucracy'* or *'diverted',* with little reaching the intended communities.

Furthermore, accessing grants requires familiarity with *'the language of the donor'* and international frameworks, as described by the same interviewee as above. Those who already have resources, education, and connections are best placed to secure more of the same; because they already speak the language the system rewards. Gender-specific arts funding is particularly scarce. The British Council is identified by multiple interviewees as one of the only funders actively working at the intersection of gender and arts in Nepal. While the British Council's commitment serves as a vital model for gender-responsive funding, the lack of diverse funding sources in this intersection renders the sector vulnerable to a single funder's priorities and decisions.

4.2. The Threat of Harassment and Lack of Institutional Protection

Safety concerns and the lack of institutional redressal mechanisms are significant barriers which create a hostile environment for women and gender-diverse creatives in the art and culture sector in Nepal. For example, the daily working conditions and safety fears in the film industry are precarious, evidenced by inflexible and demanding schedules that require being constantly away from home. This situation is intensified by the pressure of working alongside all-male

production crews on outdoor or remote shoots. An established female filmmaker and founder of a production house, with extensive experience in documentary filmmaking, illustrates this:

> *'There would be 20 men around and I felt like I was constantly in a self-defensive mode. I felt like I had to constantly be aware, whether it was when I was eating or moving about, lest people talk ill about me. There weren't any incidents as such from my team, but I was constantly fearful.'*

Online harassment is also recognised as an issue that poses an increasingly significant threat to women and gender-diverse artists. According to the Nepal Police Cyber Bureau in FY 2023/24, there were 19,730 cybercrime complaints, of which 8,745 cases involved violence against women, and 382 cases involved girls (Haridass, 2025). While momentum is shifting through greater awareness and advocacy against online harassment, greater attention is needed to address the risks faced by women and gender-diverse creatives who use digital platforms for advocacy or for sharing their work with a wider audience.

Academic and arts institutions across Nepal widely lack formal anti-harassment policies, and awareness of where and how to raise concerns within the sector remains limited. This is made worse by a culture where a *'buddy-buddy system'* protects powerful perpetrators, as one director of an arts non-profit and university lecturer interviewed for this study criticises: *'There are no safeguarding policies in any of the institutions… They [individuals in positions of power within academic and art institutions] are all just protecting each other. It's highly problematic'.*

On paper, legislation represents a meaningful framework for addressing sexual harassment in professional settings. The Sexual Harassment at the Workplace (Prevention) Act 2014 requires employers to establish complaint committees and take preventive action, while Section 132 of the Labour Act 2017 classifies sexual harassment as a terminable offence and places a legal obligation on employers to maintain safe working environments. Yet awareness of these provisions among practitioners in Nepal's arts and culture sector remains limited (Adhiraj & Dixit, 2020), and their practical reach stops well short of the conditions under which most creative work actually takes place. Both Acts assume the existence of a formal employer, a registered workplace, and an institutional structure capable of receiving and acting on complaints. UNESCO Baseline Assessment (2026) documents that 49% of Nepal's creative workforce operates entirely outside formal employment. For practitioners working freelance, on short-term contracts, or within informal networks, these laws would fail to protect them.

The professional consequences of speaking out make this lack of institutional protection more dangerous. A female creative involved in the #MeToo movement interviewed for this study experienced a *'wave'* where people tried to make it difficult for her to get work, with the narrative that '*we shouldn't be working with her being present'.*

Further, artists, including women and gender-diverse creatives involved in activism on national policies, often face systemic censorship. The risks are compounded for artists whose creative work challenges the state, particularly for gender-diverse artists or those from ethnic, racially minoritised communities. Gender-diverse filmmakers, ethnic minority practitioners, and those from racially minoritised communities describe a form of pressure that does not begin with the censorship board; it begins at the writing stage (Kathmandu Post, 2026). These dynamic drives self-censorship deep into the creative process itself. As Naidu (2026) writes on censorship in film, one male filmmaker warns that '*artists censor a scene even before writing it, if they deem it*

too controversial'. Another male filmmaker acknowledged becoming mindful of themes critical of ethnicity, religion, or the state at the scripting stage (Naidu, 2026). For artists from ethnic and racial minority backgrounds operating within a nationalist context, these risks are compounded further. The case of a Madhesi filmmaker accused of inciting racial conflict without a single scene of his film being viewed by the Censor Board illustrates the extreme of this logic: identity itself becomes grounds for institutional suspicion, and artistic work is judged before it is seen (Naidu, 2026). Gender-diverse artists face an additional barrier in the legal system, where a human rights lawyer notes that judges are predominantly drawn from dominant castes and classes in which sexuality and minority rights remain taboo (Kathmandu Post, 2026). The result is an environment of uncertainty where the threat of censorship, reputational damage, and professional exclusion disproportionately silences those whose identities already place them outside the protection of dominant institutional structures.

These conditions can lead to a talent drain in the arts and culture sector. For gender diverse creatives, the above-mentioned legal risks, compounded with the conservative societal norms, make it difficult for them to openly express their identity or pursue artistic careers. This then forces those gender-diverse creatives with access to international opportunities to *'leave Nepal rather than navigate this professional landscape'.* The broader arts community's avoidance of open discussion about gender identity and sexuality reflects a necessary act of self-preservation in a deeply conservative environment.

Despite these challenges, the arts and culture sector remains a potential refuge for gender-diverse creatives as it fosters grassroots networks, collectives, and alternative art spaces that offer a vital sense of belonging and peer support. Within these communities, gender-diverse individuals can find safe, inclusive platforms for artistic experimentation and self-expression, allowing them to navigate and counter broader societal restrictions.

4.3. Intersectional Bias and Discrimination

Nepal's arts and culture sector is dominated by urban, dominant-caste, high-class practitioners. This concentration of power actively reproduces itself through every stage of a creative career. Understanding its effects requires holding caste, class, gender, disability, and geography together; their combination leads to severe exclusions.

The exclusion starts early in education. An indigenous professional interviewed for this study recounts being told by a theatre teacher in school that *'faces like [yours] are of no use'.* This is more than an isolated act of individual prejudice, but an institutional signal about whose presence the sector is prepared to accommodate. It can shape what young practitioners from marginalised communities understand to be possible for them.

Caste is regarded as limiting participation in everyday life, let alone positions of power and leadership. A female Dalit filmmaker interviewed for this study highlights that such discrimination has made it necessary for her to conceal her caste identity while travelling for work, lying about who she is in order to access accommodation in host homes without fear of discrimination. A Dalit theatre artist with 18 years of experience, interviewed for this study, shares that discrimination permeates even *'when it comes to mealtimes... we are asked if we are Dalit or Kshetrias.'* What this testimony makes visible is that caste-based discrimination in

the arts is a daily, embodied reality that determines not only who leads but who is allowed to eat at the same table.

The experience of disabled women creatives reveals how stigma and structural inaccessibility create compounding barriers (Thapa, B. B., 2011). For disabled women, cultural stigmas particularly limit their participation. The belief that life with a disability is a *'tragic life'* creates a profound societal contradiction when these individuals pursue joyful artistic expression. A blind female artist and founder of a disability-focused arts organisation working across dance, music, and film expresses this tension between creative agency and social perception:

> *'Sometimes I have realised when we try to go to different artistic and social settings [people say] "how can you, being a woman with a disability, have so much fun? How can you be happy?" Because for people, our life is a tragic life. To be in art, to have this fun, to have all these colours in life, is so contradictory to their fixed mindset. And I think all of this creates a challenge, and sometimes we ourselves also hesitate to go there.'*

Infrastructure accessibility poses further barriers. Inaccessible venues, digital platforms without audio tools, and visual-first communication design do not merely inconvenience disabled creatives; they limit entry entirely. A disabled Nepali artist and founder of a disability-focused organisation interviewed for this study describes what happens when applications are not designed with access in mind: *'Even the online application forms are not accessible. How do we access them? How do we apply? How do we extract the information? These days people rely on images to communicate – but when everything is an image, we know nothing.'* This is not a technical oversight. Global disability inclusion research documents explicitly state that *'poorly designed programmes or inaccessible information, facilities or services can create barriers for eligible beneficiaries'*. It also mentions that access is routinely restricted by *'poor accessibility of systems, including inaccessible application and pay points, information about programmes and how to apply'* (Global Disability Summit, 2025). When applications default to visual formats without alternative provision, blind creatives are excluded by the design choices of those who built the system without them in mind.

Rural women creatives also face compounding barriers. Nepal's arts and culture infrastructure, production houses, film schools, post-production studios, exhibition spaces, and professional networks, are overwhelmingly concentrated in the Kathmandu Valley. The UNESCO Baseline Assessment (2026) identifies Kathmandu as the explicit epicentre of Nepal's arts and culture scene, noting that because many film schools and training institutions are based in the Valley, accessing skills development is structurally difficult for those living outside it. This urban concentration means that creatives across all genders from rural areas face compounding disadvantages: limited local opportunities, inadequate transport, and an absence of professional infrastructure. The report further documents that rural artisans remain undocumented and invisible to official systems due to the absence of a centralised national registry, blocking them from receiving information about state subsidies, training, and social protection that exist on paper but do not reach them in practice. For practitioners outside the capital, participation in the sector often requires migration. The report includes the experience of a director of an acclaimed film: '*I ran away from home and came to Kathmandu with the ambition to learn about film. I was determined to learn filmmaking, and Kathmandu was the only viable place for this, because the Valley quite literally has everything that the rest of the region still doesn't have today.'*

An established female film producer and trained journalist with nearly a decade of experience, interviewed for this study echoes this directly. She stated that '*women from rural areas simply do not have access to the right people or opportunities*', and that unless a creative is based in Kathmandu, they are effectively shut out of technical and creative filmmaking roles. For rural women, however, migration is not a straightforward option. Men can often navigate travel alone; women face mobility restrictions, safety risks, and caregiving expectations that make leaving home to pursue a creative career a different proposition. As a non-binary activist and founder of a communal art space interviewed for this study describes: '*You can be the most incredible artist, but you can be in a mountain village in Nepal, and nobody ever sees your work.'* This indicates a system that has concentrated creative resources in one place and then forces those furthest from it to close the distance on their own.

Class operates as the thread that runs through all of these barriers, amplifying each one. Sustaining a career in Nepal's low-earning arts and culture sector is, as one journalist and film producer with nearly a decade of experience interviewed for this study describes, predominantly reserved for *'urban women from high-ranking castes or well-established families'.* Those from lower economic backgrounds are routinely forced to take on multiple jobs or abandon creative careers entirely in favour of more economically stable work. In Nepal, economic privilege is concentrated among dominant-caste groups, who hold disproportionate access to resources, education, and high-status positions across politics, bureaucracy, and cultural sectors. Dalits[6], who comprise 13.4% of the population, face poverty rates nearly double the national average and are overrepresented in low-wage informal work. Dalit musicians and performers from the Damai and Gaine castes are expected to perform ritual music in the service of upper-caste ceremonies, yet they remain socially segregated and economically devalued, receiving little financial recognition for labour that is simultaneously indispensable and made invisible. Dalit women bear the sharpest edge of this: earning significantly less than their peers, with minimal wage protection in informal arts labour (Rauniyar, 2025; Walsh, 2025; International Dalit Solidarity Network, 2022; Action Aid International Nepal, 2021).

The UNESCO Baseline Assessment (2026) makes the institutional mechanism behind this exclusion concrete. Home-based producers, a category disproportionately comprising women from lower-caste and rural backgrounds, are rendered ineligible for loans, export facilitation, and government recognition. Not because of any shortcoming in their practice, but because the eligibility criteria are designed around formal, registered enterprises. Caste and class determine the ability to unlock education, networks, and opportunity, which is itself unevenly distributed along caste lines.

[6] Dalit is a term of political identity used by groups historically positioned at the bottom of the South Asian caste hierarchy and subjected to 'untouchability.' In Nepal, this includes the Damai and Gaine communities, who are defined by their hereditary professional craftsmanship. The Damai are traditionally tailors and master musicians who perform in auspicious brass and drum ensembles (known as Panche Baaja) at weddings and festivals.

The Gaine (or Gandharba) are itinerant bards who travel the country sharing news and oral histories through song, accompanied by the Sarangi, a four-stringed hand-carved lute or fiddle. despite their essential role as the custodians of Nepal's folk music and sartorial traditions, these groups face systemic 'social distancing' and exclusion from shared meals or religious spaces

5. Social Impact and Advocacy

Women and gender diverse artists are increasingly using their work as a tool for social change, challenging restrictive social norms, and creating platforms for marginalised voices through physical and digital means.

5.1. Challenging Norms and Amplifying Marginalised Voices

Across Nepal's arts and culture sector, women and gender-diverse artists are actively mobilising creative practice as a tool for social change. Across film, theatre, street art, and digital platforms, they are actively using creative practice as a tool for social change, challenging the norms that constrain them and building platforms for voices that are routinely marginalised within the sector.

Film has emerged as a particularly powerful medium for reframing public narratives. Adhiraj and Dixit (2020) document its capacity to shift attitudes by presenting women and girls as leaders and changemakers rather than as passive subjects. Subina Shrestha's 2024 documentary *Devi* demonstrates this in practice: by centring the experiences of survivors of sexual violence during Nepal's ten-year civil war, the film brought a gender perspective to a conflict that had been documented almost exclusively through a male lens. This is both a creative and political choice, contesting whose suffering counts as history and whose testimony is treated as evidence.

Theatre has carried this political function across multiple moments of social change in Nepal. *Aba Pariwartan Hunuparchha* (Now There Must Be Change), produced by Blue Diamond Society, Nepal's pioneering organisation for sexual minority rights, staged during the country's critical constitutional transition, was an act of advocacy for LGBTQIA+ individuals. By weaving together narratives around legal recognition (including citizenship rights) and the lived realities of familial rejection, the production sought to humanise gender-diverse people for a broader public audience. Crucially, every performer was themselves an LGBTQIA+ artist, making the production not only an act of advocacy but of authentic self-representation. It is a deliberate refusal to allow dominant-caste, cisgender practitioners to narrate queer experience on behalf of those living it (Sharma, 2011). This approach has continued to recent years. *Private is Political*, staged amid the #MeToo movement in 2019, by the theatre group that had performed The Vagina Monologues in Nepal for several years, used real testimonies to confront gender-based violence and patriarchal norms, framing women's private experiences as inherently political (Paudel, 2019). Most recently, *But Still, We Rise*, produced by Katha Ghera with British Council Nepal support, premiered at the WOW Nepal Festival in 2024. The production featured LGBTIQA+ and disabled people cast portraying the struggles and triumphs of queer, disabled, and indigenous women (Kathmandu Post, 2024). Taken together, these productions trace a sustained tradition of performance as protest, one that insists on the political significance of who tells a story and who gets to perform it.

The contested nature of this visibility is most sharply illustrated by Nepal's drag scene. Legal recognition of a 'third gender' category has created the conditions for greater public presence, yet the drag scene's growing visibility has not translated into acceptance (Kunwar, 2024). The

drag scene overtly challenges rigid gender norms through visibility and performance. Since emerging in LGBTIQA+ friendly underground venues and online spaces in the 2010s, Nepal's drag scene has grown in visibility. Performers such as Miss Barbie and Momolicca blend local cultural elements, traditional Nepali attire, and drag aesthetics to challenge rigid gender norms in public, and events like the *Drag Show for Visibility* at Hard Rock Cafe Kathmandu marked an increasing willingness to occupy mainstream spaces. Yet performers continue to face family rejection, societal stigma, and restricted venue access, with many events still confined to underground spaces (Ray, 2024; Shrestha, 2023). Kunwar's (2024) analysis of Kathmandu's drag scene from 2001 to 2024 frames these tensions as part of a broader (de)colonial resistance, one in which drag fosters queer community and identity precisely because it refuses to be invisible, even as discrimination persists.

Some Dalit and indigenous artists are actively using their work to reclaim their identity and counter harmful cultural representations, using mediums such as street play, documentaries, graffiti and theatre. Their work is often organised through artivism[7], the deliberate use of public space and artistic practice as a mode of political advocacy. Street theatre in particular has a well-established history as an advocacy tool in Nepal, used by NGOs and the development sector to bring social issues directly into public and community spaces. Women-led organisations have been especially prominent in this tradition. For instance, Janaki Women Awareness Society (JWAS), a women-led NGO, partnered with Population Media Center in 2019, trained 60 Maithili and Musahar (Dalit) girls in street drama, creating performances challenging child marriage and advocating for girls' education (Population Media Center, 2019).

Grassroots networks sustain this work and extend it. Kaalo.101, a femme- and queer-run independent creative space in Patan, supports artists to make socially conscious and consciousness-raising work that engages with the physical, social, and cultural context around it. This kind of collective organising has also emerged directly from the professional isolation that women in the film industry describe. Initiatives like the Nepali Female Filmmakers (NFF) were created as a safe space for women to share opportunities and discuss issues like low pay and harassment. What began as an informal Facebook group, Nepali Female Filmmakers, has since formalised as Women in Film Nepal, engaging hundreds of women. A female arts director and foundation manager based in Kathmandu interviewed for this study, working primarily across contemporary visual arts curation and large-scale festivals, describes the benefits of such solidarity networks: *'Women-to-women networks are particularly helpful for sharing opportunities and mutual support'*.

These grassroots networks are not supplementary to Nepal's arts sector. They are common in the regions and communities where formal institutions do not reach. The UNESCO Baseline Assessment (2026) recommends developing creative corridors across Nepal's regions to distribute cultural and economic benefits more equitably and to revitalise local creative traditions, an acknowledgement that the current concentration of infrastructure and opportunity in Kathmandu is a policy weakness with remedial solutions. What the evidence from this study makes visible, however, is that women-led collectives and feminist networks have already been doing this work. They have built the connective tissue between isolated practitioners, redistributed knowledge and opportunity, and created the conditions for creative practice to

[7] Artivism is the practice of using art and artistic expression as a tool for social and political activism.

survive outside the capital. The question is not whether these networks are valuable. The question is why the state and formal institutions have left their construction entirely to those who are already most under-resourced.

5.2. Platforms and Accessibility for Advocacy

Access to platforms for advocacy and creative expression in Nepal is expanding, but not equally. Digital platforms have created new possibilities for artists to reach audiences directly, bypassing the gatekeepers that have historically controlled visibility in the sector (British Council Nepal, 2021). Social media in particular has lowered the cost of distribution, allowing women and gender-diverse practitioners to share work, build audiences, and engage in public advocacy outside the circuits of formal cultural institutions. Yet this shift has not dissolved existing inequalities; they continue through digital divide. In practice, three factors continue to exclude people in remote and rural areas: the high cost of quality devices, unreliable connectivity, and limited digital literacy. As a result, the openness that digital platforms appear to offer does not reach everyone equally.

As for physical spaces, community-driven initiatives and grassroots events are filling gaps that mainstream commercial venues have failed to address. The Nexus Culture Centre presented an early attempt to create an inclusive physical space: *'a space for everybody. It's a safe, brave space where anyone can come and be themselves',* as described by a senior female visual artist whose practice spans conceptual art, performance, and multimedia. Even though it has since closed, the ambition has been continued by a growing ecosystem of festivals and events that are building inclusion into their design. The Women of the World (WOW) Festival, held annually in Nepal, from 2017 to 2022 and biennially since with British Council support, brings together women, girls, and gender-diverse artists through performances, talks, workshops, and screenings. The festival is designed to be inclusive: venues are made physically accessible, and content warnings and moderated spaces help ensure performers and audiences feel safe engaging with difficult themes around gender-based violence, identity, and climate. Artists are also supported beyond the stage itself, through grants, stipends, and capacity-building opportunities, and by being connected to a wider global network of over 200 WOW events worldwide. The British Council awards annual gender-focused arts grants, now branded as the Equal Together: Gender Grants, which fund creative projects led by women, gender-diverse, and marginalised artists across Nepal. Across Kathmandu, other events are similarly carving out space for gender-diverse expression and centred on women and gender diverse creatives (British Council Nepal, 2024; British Council, 2017). The Queer Film Festival Kathmandu, now in its second edition, also creates safe spaces through no-photography policies, ally-trained staff, and low-cost or free screenings, offering gender-diverse artists and audiences a rare platform outside mainstream venues (The Rising Nepal, 2026). God is a Woman, an annual feminist art and music festival, similarly centres safety through consent codes, affordable ticketing, and trauma-informed facilitation, providing space for femme and queer expression in a context where such visibility is rarely guaranteed (Acharya, 2024).

Public spaces are also transformed through initiatives like street art and graffiti, which are used to *'communicate political content'* in a way that resonates directly with local communities even in conservative areas, as described by a non-binary activist and founder of a communal art space

interviewed for this study. Exhibitions have also served as platforms for expanding the public vocabulary around gender and sexuality. For example, *Photo Kathmandu* dedicates entire editions to these themes. Its Feminist Memory Project, launched in 2018 by Nepal Picture Library, deepens this work through an ongoing digital archive documenting women's public lives, activism, and feminist movements in Nepal. By collecting citizen-contributed images, oral histories, and documents, the project actively counters male-dominated historical narratives. It draws on women's roles in politics, protests, and civil war solidarity, from the 1951 suffrage movement onwards. This project demonstrates how archival and artistic practice can work together to sustain feminist memory beyond any single exhibition or event (Nayar, 2023; Deupala, 2018).

Case Study | From Challenges to Collective Strength: Advocacy through Filmmaking

The media and filmmaking sectors in Nepal present significant, and often intersectional, barriers to women and marginalised creators. Our interviews highlight that women often face gendered challenges. This includes the inability to pursue high-risk or politically sensitive stories due to societal pressure and a constant need to operate in a defensive mode when working alongside predominantly male crews in remote areas.

Furthermore, these challenges are compounded by caste-based discrimination. A Nepali, full-time filmmaker and producer, from a marginalised community describes the experience of having to lie about her identity out of fear when travelling and working. This later provides a critical foundation for her work in social advocacy.

The filmmaker-producer started her own production house, focused on telling the stories of women, Dalit, indigenous, and other marginalised communities. The production house developed and produced a national television series. The series featured famous celebrities and openly discussed the discrimination faced by a marginalised community in Nepal. This initiative demonstrates the powerful potential of art to enable public discourse and social justice, despite facing significant pushback, hate comments, and accusations of being externally funded.

The filmmaker-producer also co-founded a professional community and advocacy group for female creatives, as a direct response to the systemic challenges and the scarcity of female artists face. What started as a social media page, has grown into a vital community of over hundreds of women. It functions as a safe space where members can share experiences related to low pay, physical, and other forms of harassment without fear of professional reprisal. The organisation also provides grants, shares knowledge, organises screenings for films, and provides a collective support structure that counters the industry's clique culture.

The work of the filmmaker-producer offers several strategic lessons:

- **Power of Collective Safety:** Creating a community-led, informal safe space for women from marginalised backgrounds is an immediate and effective strategy to address pervasive harassment and professional isolation in high-risk sectors like filmmaking, serving as a critical support system where formal institutions fail.

- **Embracing Controversy for Impact:** Advocacy-driven content, particularly when tackling sensitive issues like caste and religion, can generate significant societal impact, even if it leads to public controversy.
- **Risk of Exclusion for Artivists:** The primary challenge for artists who are vocal about gender, caste, or identity issues is the risk of professional exclusion. This is done by *'labelling'* them, which attempts to pressure them into silence by withholding opportunities. This fear keeps many established artists from engaging in social advocacy.

This case study highlights critical areas for cultural organisations to focus their arts programming and partnerships:

- **Support Intersectional Storytelling:** Continue to actively seek out and support projects that explicitly tackle intersectional issues of gender, caste, and ethnicity. Recognising that these stories, while controversial, are essential for social progress and empowerment is essential to support women and gender diverse artists to use their artforms for social advocacy and change.
- **Invest in Sustainability of Community Networks:** Move beyond short-term grants. Instead provide flexible, multi-year support for community-led initiatives, helping them formalise processes, increase their membership, and ensure their continuity as vital safe spaces and professional development hubs.
- **Prioritise Economic Viability:** Address the central challenge of sustainability by funding initiatives that focus on the downstream economic viability of filmmaking. This could include support for training in international sales, distribution, and platform pitching, as well as lobbying efforts to connect independent, socially conscious art to national television or other income-generating platforms.

6. Skills and Development

Skills and professional development in Nepal's arts sector remain structurally inaccessible for most women and gender-diverse creatives. This section examines the specific barriers shaping that access, the skills practitioners identify as most critical, and the networks and funding needed to support sustained creative careers.

6.1. Structural Barriers to Skills Access

Skills and development for women and gender-diverse creatives in Nepal's arts and culture sector remain critically under-supported. Access to quality training is heavily shaped by class and economic privilege, with wealth functioning as a gatekeeper to education and professional networks. This means that skills alone are often insufficient to secure progression without the backing of *'sincere allies'* who can help address systemic barriers to access and progression, as pointed out by a non-binary activist and founder of a communal art space interviewed for this study. Furthermore, existing government training programmes are widely regarded as poorly designed and misaligned with actual market needs. A senior female visual artist and founder of independent contemporary art spaces in Kathmandu interviewed for this study criticises the dominant educational model for *'spoon-feeding'* technical instruction at the expense of critical thinking, articulation, and creative problem-solving. Where training does exist, it tends to be short-term (one or two-day workshops) that offer little space for sustained development (UNESCO, 2026).

As the evidence in previous sections illustrates, what women and gender-diverse creatives in Nepal need is not a single-entry point but sustained, multi-year investment in their development, covering technical skills, leadership, networks, and financial literacy. The challenge is to build longer-term, structured programmes that follow women through their careers rather than meeting them only at the door. The gaps are also highly specific. Women report significant under-representation in leadership and management roles, limited access to technical and digital skills due to both societal bias and the digital divide. They also report a particular disadvantage when it comes to accessing international funding, where familiarity with grant-writing conventions and donor language is often a prerequisite. These barriers compound further for artists from rural areas, Dalit women, and individuals with disabilities, who face multiple overlapping layers of exclusion from the skills ecosystem.

6.2. The Skills, Networks, and Funding Needed

To thrive, women and gender-diverse professionals require targeted skill development and supportive networks that extend beyond artistic training to include business acumen, leadership, and digital skills. Adhiraj and Dixit (2020) argue that creative professionals need support in non-artistic areas to ensure economic sustainability and professional growth, which is critical in a sector defined by financial precarity. Women and gender-diverse creatives across different art forms also highlight the importance of training in leadership, covering essential skills like event management, fundraising, and dealing with sponsors. The lack of familiarity with such skills

among women and gender-diverse artists can be attributed to inequalities in educational access and professional development opportunities.

Leadership skills are essential for women and gender-diverse creatives to thrive in the sector and enable meaningful impact for others. With leadership skills, women and gender-diverse creatives are able to lead their organisations better and continue with their creative work for social change. A disabled artist and the founder of a disability arts organisation based in Nepal interviewed for this study, notes that the goal is *'not just generating a performer but also generating a leader who could lead art advocacy efforts*.' This points to a broader need for training that equips women creatives to sustain organisations, mobilise resources, and drive systemic change, not only to produce artistic work.

Business acumen, marketing, and financial literacy consistently emerge as gaps and are seen as essential to navigate the art and culture sector. This is also echoed in UNESCO's baseline assessment of Nepal's creative industries, which called for greater business literacy among practitioners to address chronic income instability (UNESCO, 2026). Digital marketing represents a further gap, particularly for women and those in remote areas. A Dalit theatre artist based in rural Nepal with 18 years of experience, interviewed for this study, notes that '*women need training on marketing, particularly digital marketing.*' UNESCO's Baseline Assessment (2026) identifies the same gap at the sector level, documenting that digital marketing skills are among the most acute deficiencies across Nepal's creative industries, with the greatest concentrations of need outside the capital. UNESCO and Swiss Development Corporation supported initiatives in Nepal, ResiliArt Nepal and Arts and Culture Programme in Nepal, respectively have begun to address this[8] (Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, 2024; UNESCO, 2023). UNESCO ran ResiliArt Nepal between 2022 and 2023, supporting capacity-building for youth, women, and indigenous practitioners across UNESCO's seven creative fields, though no further activity has been publicly documented since (UNESCO, 2023). The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation launched its Arts and Culture Programme in Nepal (Phase 1, 2024–2028), which partners with three local cultural spaces working in documentary, music, and photography to strengthen Nepal's independent arts ecosystem (Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, 2024). The first round of grants was disbursed in 2025, and impact data is not yet available. However, there remains a growing need and demand for other international bodies and funders to provide access to similar programmes, especially for those from rural and minoritised backgrounds in Nepal.

[8] ResiliArt Nepal (UNESCO) uses a three-pronged approach to build artist capacities in business, marketing, communication, and digital skills. It starts with dialogues for discussing challenges like funding access and recommending training priorities, often partnering with groups like Kathmandu Jazz Conservatory on themes such as sustainable music careers. Next, workshops pair young artists (especially women and indigenous groups) with mentors for hands-on skills development in grant writing, articulation, and market strategies. Finally, incubators and showcasing events expose talent to markets via exhibitions and international networks, boosting digital visibility and income opportunities across UNESCO's seven creative fields like music and crafts.

The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation's Arts and Culture Programme (Phase 1, 2024–2028) represents one of the few externally funded initiatives explicitly targeting the structural conditions of Nepal's creative sector. Operating through a grant scheme across all seven provinces, it prioritises independent cultural organisations, youth, artists from discriminated groups, and practitioners in underserved and remote regions. Its core aim is to strengthen the institutional capacity of cultural spaces to empower young artists, promote gender equality, and foster inclusive social dialogue. Capacity-building support includes curated training and workshops, as well as support for cultural spaces to develop revenue-generating events to ensure longer-term sustainability

Communication skills are equally valued, particularly the ability to write with clarity and articulate ideas across professional contexts. This need becomes most acute when navigating grant applications, where the requirement to write in English acts as a structural barrier for many. As one filmmaker-producer from the Dalit community interviewed for this study describes, an artist from Madhesh or the Far-West applying for a workshop '*would have to fill a form which might not be their first language – it might be their third language*.' Another Dalit theatre artist based in rural Nepal with 18 years of experience, interviewed for this study, makes the need explicit: '*I wish for training on how to write proposals in the English language.'*

Structural inequality to access networks often overrides skill alone. Mentorship, allies and support networks are necessary, especially for those from underrepresented backgrounds. As a filmmaker interviewee explains: *'When you have connections and access, you receive the opportunities. If not, it takes you time. Most also give up in between.'* To overcome this challenge, several sustained initiatives have emerged to bridge the gap in social capital for women and gender-diverse artists. Organisations such as Plan International have implemented filmmaking programmes for young women, while grassroots collectives like Cut Katha provide feminist-centred mentorship. These programmes do more than teach technical skills; they provide the insider social networks necessary for a sustainable career in the arts.

Equitable support also demands a deliberate shift beyond Kathmandu. Nepal's arts sector is heavily concentrated in the capital, creating compounding barriers for creatives in rural areas who lack access to training, infrastructure, and professional networks. A Dalit filmmaker and producer interviewed for this study illustrates how this plays out in practice: accessing a single workshop can require navigating an application form in a second language, securing internet access, and travelling to Kathmandu, a set of hurdles that effectively exclude rural creatives before they have even begun. A senior female visual artist and founder of multiple alternative art spaces based in Nepal interviewed for this study reinforces this from an infrastructure perspective, arguing for art spaces to be established across regions so that women artists outside Kathmandu have physical places to gather, create, and exchange. This is corroborated by the UNESCO CCI Baseline Assessment (2026), which recommends developing creative corridors to distribute cultural and economic benefits more equitably and revitalise local creative traditions. Taken together, the evidence suggests that without deliberate decentralisation, skills programmes and funding opportunities will continue to benefit those already closest to existing networks, deepening rather than addressing inequality.

International exposure through festivals and global platforms is a confidence-building and career-defining resource that the domestic ecosystem may not provide. A female theatre artist and activist based in Karnali Province interviewed for this study, working primarily across grassroots community theatre, situates this directly within the constraints of patriarchal norms:

> '*Within the patriarchal thought, only men go out of the house or out of the country and women don't. Women are supposedly people who take care of the house and children. So, to respond to that, if we're sent to trainings within and out of the country, our confidence would increase*.'

A disabled artist and the founder of a disability arts organisation based in Nepal interviewed for this study, echoes this, describing her experience at the Unlimited Festival in London, supported

by the British Council as '*very helpful for me as an art leader'*. She notes that for disabled artists, such platforms '*give motivation [and] visibility*.'

Yet access to these opportunities is deeply unequal. UNESCO's recent report (2026) on the Cultural and Creative Industries in Nepal notes that participation in international festivals and trade fairs is often prohibitively expensive. There is no consistent state-backed travel fund or grant mechanism in Nepal, grassroots and marginalised creatives are routinely forced to self-fund or miss out entirely. The result is that international exposure, one of the most effective tools for professional development, is available primarily to those who are already privileged enough to afford it (UNESCO, 2026). This points to a clear role for existing funders and international partners in the arts and culture ecosystem: to actively enable access to international festivals.

The limited state support, with inadequate funding and a lack of policy support, means that women and gender-diverse creatives in Nepal are almost entirely dependent on foreign and NGO funding to develop their practice. Arts and culture have been consistently sidelined in political manifestos and public budgets, leaving no meaningful state mechanism for artist development. Most NGOs that engage with the arts do so through a social advocacy lens, framing creative work as a vehicle for gender equality or community dialogue rather than investing in artists' professional growth. This limits the kind of sustained, practice-focused support that creatives actually need. International cultural institutions are plugging the gaps. For example, the British Council and Swiss Development Corporation stand out as rare funders that treat the arts as a sector in its own right, through grants, exhibitions, and capacity-building initiatives.

7. Stakeholders and Opportunities

There are a range of stakeholders who have the potential to drive gender equality in Nepal's arts and culture sector, working at different levels and with diverse audience groups.

Feminist and Grassroots Arts Collectives

These are the key drivers of change: creating safe spaces, advocating for marginalised communities (e.g. gender diverse, Dalit), and producing political art. Their work extends beyond artistic production. They document and preserve the histories and voices that formal institutions routinely overlook, functioning as counter-archives and acts of resistance. Through their work, they actively challenge dominant cultural narratives, contesting not just what stories are told, but whose voices are centred and how. They build solidarities across movements, connecting feminist arts practice with caste justice and queer activism, recognising that these struggles are deeply intertwined. They also provide peer learning and informal mentorship for those who cannot access formal or institutional pathways. In doing so, they hold the mainstream arts sector accountable and push for structural change in policy and practice. This includes organisations like the Kaalo.101, Meraki Chenn, Junkiri Feminist Library (Voices of Women Media and the Photo Circle.

Arts and Cultural NGOs / Academic Institutions

These carry wide-ranging responsibilities within the art and culture sector. These include skills development, providing accessible platforms, and implementing social impact projects. They also play a central role in producing knowledge: conducting research, generating insights, and building the evidence needed to understand and address gender inequity in the arts. Academic institutions hold a distinctive educational role. Art education offers opportunities to embed gender literacy across the curriculum. An interdisciplinary approach that brings together arts and gender studies deepens students' critical understanding of the structures that shape creative life. This, in turn, equips graduates with the analytical and relational skills that the sector increasingly needs.

Examples of arts and cultural NGOs and academic institutions include Srijanalaya, Central Department of Fine Arts - Tribhuvan University and Kathmandu University School of Arts

The Government Bodies

Government bodies are responsible for enacting and implementing national policy relevant to gender equity in the arts. In Nepal, this includes institutions such as the Nepal Academy of Fine Arts and the Film Development Board. Their functions include enforcing legislation such as anti-harassment laws, allocating public funding, and formally recognising artistic work and practitioners.

International Agencies and Funders

International agencies and funders provide essential tailored funding, technical expertise, and international exposure through grants, fellowships, festivals and workshops. This includes organisations like UN Women, UNESCO, British Council, Plan International Nepal and Swiss Development Corporation.

8. Recommendations

The gender analysis of Nepal's arts and culture sector reveals a dynamic but deeply uneven landscape. A paradox of activism and exclusion exists, where grassroots collectives led by women and/or gender-diverse artists drive critical discourse, yet their work is constantly undermined by institutional barriers that impair career progression, the lack of safeguarding policies, and limited accessible funding opportunities.

These challenges are compounded by intersectional disparity. Discrimination is overwhelmingly amplified by identity, with artists who are Dalit, indigenous, or disabled facing multiple layers of oppression and exclusion. Furthermore, the arts and culture sector is heavily Kathmandu-centric, exacerbating the sustainability challenge faced by independent artists who struggle with unequal pay, reliance on privileged networks and a funding system prone to bureaucracy and corruption that often bypasses grassroots organisations.

These recommendations are anchored in a rigorous qualitative feminist methodology that generates deep insights into the systemic gender inequality faced by women and gender-diverse artists. Rejecting the attempt to find universalised patterns where mainstream social science often does (Lorde, 1984; Jackson & Jones, 1998), this study's rigour is built upon the lived and living memories of our key informants: women and gender-diverse artists and/or arts leaders who play an influential role in the arts and culture sector in Nepal. Their stories cast a crucial light on the under-explored landscape of gender equality in the arts and culture sector and beyond. Honouring the understanding that 'the personal is political' (Hanisch, 1969), we analyse these personal struggles as systemic issues and produce the following recommendations. In this context, a number of actions could further gender equality in Nepal's arts and culture sector:

8.1. For International Cultural Institutions and Funders

For international cultural institutions and funders, including the British Council, we recommend the following measures:

- **Move to multi-year, trust-based funding:** Move away from short-term, reimbursement-based project grants towards multi-year funding cycles that prioritise women, gender-diverse-led and grassroots organisations and community networks.
- **Grant-making practices need to reach those most excluded:** International funders should audit their grant-making processes, identify and remove mechanisms that systematically disadvantage under-resourced applicants. This means accepting applications in multiple formats and languages, offering grant-writing mentorship to first-time applicants from marginalised backgrounds, simplifying reporting requirements, and shifting accountability frameworks to centre community outcomes. Direct funding to grassroots and community-based collectives should become standard practice rather than an exception.
- **Make gender equity an explicit condition of partnership:** Embed gender equity as a formal criterion in partnership selection and funding decisions, including expectations around the composition of leadership and governance of partner organisations, and the extent to

which programmes demonstrably reach those most excluded from existing provision. Review partnerships annually against these criteria.

- **Apply an intersectional lens to all programming:** All programme design, implementation, and evaluation must acknowledge that barriers are not uniform. Representation targets should include gender, caste, ethnicity, disability, and geographic location. Co-design programmes with artists who have lived experience of these intersecting barriers, and track outcomes that reflect systemic change, including professional progression, income stability, and organisational sustainability, not only participation numbers.
- **Invest in capacity beyond artistic skills:** Continue to design and fund capacity-building programmes that address the skills gaps most commonly cited by women and gender-diverse creatives in Nepal: leadership, financial literacy, grant-writing, digital marketing, and event management. Programmes should be delivered outside Kathmandu, with targeted outreach to Dalit women, rural artists, and artists with disabilities.
- **Build the capacity of the wider ecosystem, not only individual artists:** Support creative sector institutions and intermediary organisations to develop stronger business and organisational capabilities, including financial management, governance, and strategic planning. Recognising that a well-functioning ecosystem is a prerequisite for individual artists to thrive, direct at least a portion of capacity-building investment towards the organisations and networks, including grassroots networks and collectives, that sustain creative practice over time.
- **Establish dedicated mobility fellowships and facilitate market access for marginalised artists:** Continue to provide fully funded exchange programmes, residencies, and festival participation opportunities specifically for Dalit, indigenous, and disabled artists, for whom the cost of international exposure is otherwise prohibitive. Use convening networks to broker connections between Nepali artists and international platforms, actively facilitating market opportunities and supporting the development of sustainable creative livelihoods.
- **Champion accessible and inclusive programming across partnerships:** Require partner organisations, including festivals, training programmes, and cultural platforms, to embed gender-focused activities, physical access provisions, and practical support such as childcare as conditions of funding support. Develop shared accessibility toolkits and evaluation frameworks that partners are supported to adopt, establishing a common standard across the sector.
- **Lead or participate in multi-funder consortia:** Collaborate with other international agencies, embassies, and private sector actors to build a pooled, diversified fund for gender equity in Nepal's arts sector. A consortium model reduces the sector's dependence on any single donor, enables longer funding cycles, and creates shared accountability for outcomes.
- **Use convening influence to advance safeguarding standards:** Draw on international networks to connect Nepali arts organisations with good practice on safeguarding and anti-harassment from the UK and other countries. Prioritise partnerships with organisations whose work actively centres safeguarding and create structured opportunities for Nepali partners to engage with international practitioners and legal experts.

- **Commission and share research on gender equity in Nepal's arts sector:** Generate and disseminate evidence that can inform programming, advocacy, and sector-wide learning. Research should be co-designed with local partners, shared in accessible formats and multiple languages, and distributed through grassroots networks. Build an evidence repository that maps enablers and barriers to progression for women and gender-diverse creatives over time, making knowledge a tool for systemic change rather than an output for international audiences alone.

8.2. For Government and Public Sector Institutions

For government and public sector institutions, we recommend the following measures:

- **Develop an arts-specific gender equity policy:** No dedicated policy framework currently exists for women or gender-diverse creatives in Nepal's arts and culture sector. The government should develop a standalone gender equity policy for the sector with measurable targets, designated accountability, and a review mechanism. This policy should be developed in consultation with women artists, Dalit practitioners, disability arts organisations, and gender-diverse creatives, and not only established institutions.
- **Reform the composition of decision-making bodies:** Appointment processes for public sector arts and culture bodies are perceived to operate through political networks, which the participants interviewed for this study identified as structurally disadvantaging women and those without party affiliation. The government should introduce transparent, merit-based appointment processes with mandatory gender, caste, and disability representation targets, and publish composition data annually.
- **Establish and enforce institutional safeguarding standards:** Academic and cultural institutions operating under government oversight widely lack formal anti-harassment policies and codes of conduct. The Ministry could introduce minimum safeguarding standards as a condition of institutional recognition and funding, with independent reporting channels and enforceable consequences for non-compliance. The government should also establish a centralised, accessible database for reporting and monitoring discrimination and harassment within the arts and culture sector, enabling patterns to be identified, evidence built over time, and accountability exercised where institutions consistently fail to act.
- **Develop safeguarding protections and social security provisions for freelance and informal creative workers:** The majority of Nepal's arts sector workforce operates outside formal employment structures, yet existing legal and safeguarding frameworks assume a stable employer-employee relationship that project-based and freelance creative work does not provide. The commissioning body, whether a production house, festival, or cultural organisation, should be held responsible for upholding minimum conduct standards when engaging freelancers. A sector-wide freelancer charter, co-designed with grassroots collectives and women's networks, should set minimum expectations around contracts, payment, and grievance processes, paired with an independent reporting mechanism held outside government.

- **Create a dedicated public fund for women and gender-diverse creatives:** Culture has been consistently sidelined in public budgets, leaving women and gender-diverse creatives almost entirely dependent on international and NGO funding. A dedicated state arts fund, with eligibility criteria designed to reach rural artists, Dalit practitioners, and disabled artists, would begin to address this structural dependency. Funding cycles should be multi-year, with simplified application processes accessible in multiple languages and transparent assessment criteria published alongside each funding call. Outreach for such initiatives should be conducted via multiple channels and platforms, both virtual and in person, ensuring that information about these opportunities doesn't remain limited to artists based in urban areas.
- **Decentralise arts infrastructure and investment beyond Kathmandu:** The concentration of training, infrastructure, and opportunity in the capital creates compounding barriers for creatives from rural areas. Decentralising arts infrastructure and investment beyond Kathmandu should be adopted as a policy commitment, with investment in rural arts spaces, training programmes, and professional networks.
- **Invest in long-term capacity building for women in film and the arts:** Government institutions should move beyond one-off skills interventions towards sustained, multi-year capacity building programmes that support women's participation and progression at multiple career stages. Programmes should track outcomes over time and be designed in consultation with women and gender diverse creatives, ensuring they respond to the specific barriers they face at different points in their careers rather than offering a single point of entry.

8.3. For Cultural Organisations and Artists Collectives

For independent cultural organisations and artists collectives, we recommend exploring the following measures:

- **Adopt transparent, gender-responsive governance:** Organisations should review the composition of their leadership, boards, and decision-making structures, setting explicit targets for representation of women, gender-diverse individuals, Dalit practitioners, disabled artists, and those from outside Kathmandu. Governance structures should be reviewed annually, and findings shared publicly.
- **Formalise safeguarding policies and accountability mechanisms:** Every cultural organisation should develop and implement a formal anti-harassment policy with clear reporting pathways, independent oversight, and defined consequences. Policies should include and be communicated to all workers, including freelancers and short-term collaborators, not only permanent staff, and reviewed regularly in consultation with those most at risk. Critically, organisations should establish independent, cross-organisational grievance committees that sit outside any single institution's authority, ensuring that complaints are not handled internally by the same networks and relationships that have historically shielded perpetrators from accountability. A shared, sector-wide mechanism of this kind would provide greater safety, independence, and trust for those most vulnerable.

- **Move beyond tokenistic inclusion in programming:** Organisations should embed gender equity as a substantive programming principle rather than a quota exercise. This means actively commissioning and platforming work by women, gender-diverse, Dalit, disabled, and rural artists, and ensuring that representation targets extend to technical and leadership roles behind the scenes, not only visible performance roles.
- **Invest in peer learning and structured mentorship:** Organisations can develop formal mentorship structures that pair established practitioners with emerging women and gender-diverse creatives, prioritising those from Dalit, indigenous, low-income, and disability backgrounds. These programmes should be treated as a core organisational function, not an ad hoc arrangement dependent on individual goodwill. Existing mentorship programmes should be restructured as fellowships with scholarship opportunities, where possible.
- **Document and archive marginalised artistic practices:** Organisations should treat the documentation and preservation of work by marginalised artists as a deliberate and resourced organisational practice. This includes oral histories, performance recordings, and community arts processes that formal institutions have routinely failed to capture, ensuring these contributions are not erased from the sector's history.
- **Build cross-movement solidarities and coalitions:** Feminist collectives, disability arts organisations, Dalit-led groups, and rural practitioners share overlapping struggles that are strengthened through collective action. Organisations can actively build coalitions across these communities, pooling resources, sharing knowledge, and presenting a unified voice in advocacy and funding conversations.
- **Adopt family-friendly and accessible working practices:** Organisations should introduce practical measures that reduce the structural barriers to participation, including flexible scheduling, childcare provisions in project budgets, accessible venues, and remote participation options. These are not supplementary considerations but prerequisites for the genuine inclusion of women and disabled artists in creative work.
- **Prioritise economic safeguarding for women and gender-diverse practitioners:** Organisations should move towards standardised, transparent pay structures that address the gender pay gap. This includes ensuring that women and gender-diverse artists are paid equitably for labour across all roles, and that short-term or informal engagements include written agreements covering payment terms, conduct expectations, and grievance processes.

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