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## Article

# Empowering or burdening women? Assessing precariousness of vocationally trained women in Nepal

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### 1. Introduction

Financial freedom as a crucial step towards women's empowerment is a concept carrying unanimous consensus. Accordingly, for the longest time, bringing women into the labour market has been an inevitable policy priority of most governments. However, the design and implementation strategies of such policies differ worldwide. In Nepal, like most other South Asian countries, the most repetitive go-to strategy adopted by government bodies, INGOs and other independent institutions alike is providing vocational training to women.

These training programmes are led by the national skilling organization of Nepal, the Council for Technical Education and Vocational Training (CTEVT), which is responsible for planning, strategizing and delivering different levels and kinds of skill training programmes. Hierarchically, the training programmes are vocational, technical or diploma levels, each of which has its own eligibility requirement - mostly based on the student's levels of formal education - the ones with the least education being eligible only for vocational training.

At face value, promoting women in vocational training/occupation by institutions is noble - as it ensures at least some form of income as opposed to complete economic exclusion. However, adding any depth in observation would reveal that vocational training programmes are immensely gender-

segregated. The former member secretary of CTEVT, Dr Ram Hari Lamichhane identifies three distinct trades – beauty parlour, sewing and knitting – as being ‘women-friendly trades’, since these training programmes are the ones most women are interested in (Lamichhane, 2014: 12). Furthermore, he strongly recommends further development of these training programmes and their promotion among the wider population in order to equip more women with these skills, empower them and get them involved in economic activities.

Professions like beauticians and tailoring, however, are not just gender segregated, but also come with limited economic returns - and thus, Lamichhane’s arguments have not gone uncontested. Bhadra et al. (2003: 7) report the total per capita income of women after receiving different kinds of training to range from NRs. 524 (USD 4.53) to NRs. 1,550 (USD 13.40) and argues that it is unreasonable to assume ‘women’s economic empowerment’ with this ‘meagre’ amount of savings. Others like Bhadra & Shah (2007) and Messerli (2012) write that these occupations are extremely limiting for women – not only in terms of painfully low financial returns but also in terms of their domesticating nature. They argue that promoting gender-stereotyped training like beauticians and tailoring any further would be an extreme injustice towards women.

This paper situates itself right in the crux of this debate. All former assessments have mostly looked at statistics - comparing incomes, numbers of hours worked etc. - but have never really taken into account women’s own experiences of living in these professions. Knowing that vocationally trained women do have gendered occupations, restricted choices, limited formal education and precarious income, it is quintessential for their experiences and voices to be documented and represented in future policies. This research precisely addresses this gap - bringing forward women’s journeys throughout their training and job-seeking processes as well as their experiences of living in these professions - and tries to make development policies and programmes aware of women’s narratives.

To do this, this research employs a social-constructionist view of the world within a qualitative research framework - reporting the realities of vocationally trained women based on how women themselves talk about their experiences of going through intersubjective processes (Pernecky, 2016). The co-construction of knowledge happens with 19 women in Kathmandu - all either beauticians or tailors - trained to different extents in different years by CTEVT.

## **2. Development, Empowerment and Vocational Training**

### *2.1 Development and Economic Empowerment*

There is a global consensus on a need for development such that people in all parts of the world receive support to have a better quality of life. Governments and international agencies like the United Nations, World Bank and International Monetary Fund often discuss the need for development at an international level which has given rise to global development projects like the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and later Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These global projects, among other agendas, strongly emphasize economic empowerment, not only at a state level but also among individuals as economic prosperity is considered an important prerequisite for development (Van den Berg, 2016).

To further the agenda of economic empowerment, states and international organizations put significant efforts into women's empowerment projects. Given that women are greatly underrepresented in the formal labour market (Barron and Norris, 1991), skilling and enabling them to participate in economic activities could result in great prosperity for society as well as for women themselves (Duflo 2012; Doepke et al. 2012).

However, overemphasizing solely the economic aspect of empowerment and overlooking underlying causes like the systematic exclusion of women from places of power in any heteronormative patriarchal society, can be counterintuitive. Empowerment done with the mere objective of getting women into economic activities – without dealing with gender stereotypes and/or considering the quality of work/pay – does very little to radically change the ‘structural, systematic and/or institutionalized forms of subordination, oppression, and/or exploitation’ (Biewener & Bacqué, 2015: 67). Women still face numerous obstacles such as discrimination, violence, and social norms that limit them from achieving equality and advancement in many parts of the world.

Empowering women, thus, goes beyond merely ensuring women's participation in the economy. Rather, it is the process of enabling women to have more control over their own lives and make decisions that affect them. This can be achieved by raising women's status through education and training, promoting awareness and literacy and seeking and accepting women's perspectives in the decision-making process (Kabeer, 2005; Mosedale, 2005; Bayeh, 2016). Empowered women are

able to take a more active role in determining the course of their lives, have the freedom to pursue their goals and have decision-making participation in the economy.

Accordingly, any such attempts at empowerment can be measured through three core elements namely, agency, opportunity structure and degrees of empowerment (having and employing a choice for desired results) (World Bank, 2005). Furthermore, gender equality is also understood as an important element in increasing women's agency and consequently empowering women economically (Galor and Weil, 1996; Lagerlöf, 2003). To advance in these elements, governments and development organizations often support the idea of women's empowerment by providing skill training (Raj, 2014) and education - particularly through vocational training programmes (Deka, 2018).

## *2.2 Vocational Training as a Tool for Women Empowerment*

As common as Vocational Education and Training (VET) is, as a policy tool for promoting labour market participation, results from all over Asia have been quite different. Agrawal (2013) writes that Japan, Korea and Singapore have the best results; Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand and Sri Lanka have moderate results; and Bangladesh, China, India, Myanmar, Nepal and Pakistan have relatively poor results in improving labour market participation and integration. Further, Agrawal (2013) and Vollmann (2013) note that despite a growing demand for skilled labour all over Asia, labour market outcomes for those who have followed the vocational path – and even more so for people from rural areas in South Asia – have not been satisfactory in terms of economic and employment returns.

Studies from South Asia like India (World Bank, 2007a), Bangladesh (World Bank, 2007b) and Afghanistan (Savage and Brennan, 2011) besides confirming Agrawal (2013)'s analysis, also present a gender perspective. In Bangladesh, for example, World Bank (2007b: 33) shows that vocationally trained women find jobs more easily than men but only because women are more preferred to be employed in 'home-grown' jobs like sewing in garment factories which are known to be extremely low-paid. In yet another example, Savage and Brennan (2011), in their study from Afghanistan, report that an increasing number of NGOs are concentrated on skilling women, particularly in skills that are already abundant (like sewing) rather than identifying areas with unmet demands. They write:

*“Every NGO is teaching women to sew and giving them sewing machines at the end of training. There are so many women sewing that there is no one left to sell to: women just sew for their own families now.” Savage and Brennan (2011:21)*

These empirics from South Asia display associations of specific occupations with masculinity and femininity contributing to gender stereotyping of vocational fields, sexist practices and discrimination (Bredlöv, 2018), which systematically puts women in rather low-paying and vulnerable jobs. From an economic and social standpoint, these insecurities of women form a part of what Standing (2011a) calls ‘precariousness’ leading to a life full of ‘unknown unknowns’ (Standing, 2011b: 2). C. Young (2010) further pins down these insecurities of women within the VET arena as being characterized by less financial rewards, fewer benefits, part-time work status and no union protection.

Circling back to Nepal - its VET outcomes, stereotyping and women’s precarity can perhaps relate to the theories and empirics of other South Asian countries. Bhadra and Shah (2007) write that training programmes received by women in Nepal have been immensely gender-stereotypical – providing women with limited market opportunities and remunerative value. This, they claim, has led to a ‘feminization of the informal sector’ (ibid: 45) and that women, even after being vocationally trained, are unable to get out of the poverty trap specifically owing to the ‘extremely micro-sized investment enterprise’ they are involved in (ibid: 49). Although women graduating from the training programmes experience a slightly raised income, they are still unable to get out of the poverty trap – so much so, that most women ‘do not have [access to] adequate food and clothing for their families’ (Bhadra et al., 2003: 51).

The overarching research conducted by Chakravarty et al. (2019) perhaps explains the background of vocational training for women in Nepal the best. They present in their evaluation that despite efforts from the EF<sup>1</sup> to encourage women into non-traditionally female trades, most training programmes ended up being heavily gender segregated anyway – owing to continued traditional and philosophical barriers limiting their mobility, employment and occupational choices. As a result, the impacts of their EF training programmes – although considered successful – engaged women

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<sup>1</sup> The Employment Fund (EF) was established in 2008 as a result of a bilateral agreement between the Government of Nepal and the Government of Switzerland. From 2008 to 2015, the fund imparted short-term, market-oriented technical skills training to almost 100,000 young people- mostly poor and disadvantaged youth, with a special focus on women from disadvantaged backgrounds.

only in 'non-farm self-employment activities carried out inside [but not outside] the house' (Chakravarty, 2019: 92).

In the last four decades, Nepal has invested around USD 170 million annually in various unorganized training programmes (NPC, 2017). Despite this large investment, the endeavours to incentivise women in entering the labour market have been counterintuitive as it has passively, yet consistently exacerbated the problem of limiting women to precarious professions. This necessitates nuanced qualitative research exploring women's experiences in 'women-friendly' professions to inform any future development initiatives.

### **3. Methodology**

This study follows a qualitative research approach grounded in the study of Nepali women's experience of being trained in 'women-friendly' vocations offered by CTEVT. To carefully collect and analyze the contextual and subjective experiences of women, semi-structured interviews have been used after employing a purposive and stratified sampling method.

Balaju School Of Engineering and Technology, which is the oldest and largest CTEVT training school in Nepal, and has the highest number of easily accessible graduates was selected for sampling. From the list of graduates obtained, only those who were already employed (or self-employed), or looking for employment in their skilled area were included in the study. The ones who joined the training out of interest to learn the skill but without any intention of working professionally in the field were excluded from the study as their experiences would not be representative of professional beauticians and tailors. Finally, upon getting their consent, 7 tailors and 12 beauticians were selected for the interview. This ensured that both vocations had at least 6 interviewees which, according to Guest, Bunce and Johnson (2006), is the minimum number of interviews required to observe most of the relevant phenomena under study.

The data for the study was collected through semi-structured interviews. Due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic during the interview period, only 4 interviews could be conducted in person, and the remaining 15 had to be conducted over the telephone. All Covid-19 safety protocols like masking, social distancing and sanitizing were strictly observed for the safety of the participants as well as

the researchers. All interviews were conducted in the Nepali language - the national language of Nepal - as all participants were comfortable communicating in Nepali.

Each interview lasted between 40 to 50 minutes. The participants were provided with all the information regarding the study's aims, objectives and how the data they provided would be used. The interviews were voluntary in nature where verbal consent (for participants over the phone) and written consent (for in-person interviews) were attained before the interviews were initiated. As per the anonymity and confidentiality clause of the consent forms, all cautions to protect the identity of the participants have been observed.

Keeping into consideration that the participants of the research were women who potentially had precarious jobs and extremely low income, it was necessary to be mindful of how the age, sex and social position of a young male academic researcher might impact the participant's level of comfort in discussing personal and sensitive issues (Buscatto, 2018). As such, to avoid the participants from experiencing any potential harm and to ensure that they felt comfortable, the assistance of a female student pursuing a Bachelor's in Psychology was sought to facilitate the interviews. A non-disclosure agreement was secured from the assistant to preserve confidentiality. While the interview took place, the researcher played the role of an observer and a note-taker.

For analysis, a cross-sectional thematic analysis method was used to analyze the data. Meanings were derived from seemingly similar descriptions that kept recurring in many interviews, thereby suggesting that those experiences were mutual to most participants. For example, if statements like 'I couldn't do/be [something], just because I was [.....]' were recurring in several interviews, these were interpreted as experiences of closure. Similarly, if statements like 'I cannot (socially or economically) afford to [be/do something]' were recurring in several interviews, these were interpreted as experiences of precariousness.

This research was met with certain limitations. Firstly, the study included participants from only the capital city - Kathmandu, which means that the findings might not be generalizable to other regions or countries. The research methods, however, can certainly be replicated in other areas to gain more in-depth and contextual insights. Secondly, Covid-19 compelled the majority of the data collection process to rely on telephone conversations, as opposed to in-person interviews, which would certainly provide richer data in terms of the possibility of observing participants and their



body language in their own environment. This limitation, however, was minimised by being more attentive and reflective towards the verbal cues presented by the participants.

#### 4. Findings and Discussions

This chapter has two sections. The first section showcases the realities of women and their experiences - based not just on their income or working hours but also on how that income and hours fit into their lives - their vulnerabilities, experiences of inclusion/exclusion, their ability to contribute to the family etc. The second section contextualises the experiences of women within the larger socio-cultural and institutional context and analyzes how it interacts with the concept and women's feeling of empowerment.

##### 4.1 Empowering or Burdening?

The notion of beautician and tailoring being 'women-friendly vocations' and an ideal career choice for women to step into income-generating activities is widely accepted and promoted (Lamichhane, 2014; Messerli, 2012; Bhadra & Shah, 2007). As this idea propagates, more and more women are joining these professions and hustling to work and add to their incomes. A careful analysis of stories on how these women join these professions, advance in their careers and nudge other women to follow their footsteps reveal a pattern and vicious circle that continue to make these professions gender-segregated as well as precarious.

To start with how women join these professions, most participants said that they followed the recommendations of or were influenced by their friends and family or, in some cases, by vocational training institutes, NGOs/INGOs or an instructor. All participants of this research had begun their journeys by taking private lessons from other professional beauticians or tailors well before they got formal training from CTEVT. This might not be true for all beauticians and tailors in Kathmandu, however, it shows that expensive private training as a gateway into these professions is the norm.

*'My cousin was a tailor and she offered me to help her in her shop. From her, I learnt the basics of tailoring. Then I went to CTEVT's training to become more skilled as well as get a certificate. [...] Now, I have my own little shop and I work whenever I am free from other (household) work. [...] It does not make me a lot of money, but enough to*

*complement my husband's income in buying some groceries for home and stationery for children – being able to do so makes me happy!’ – T1*

*‘She (her employer) taught me everything I know and made me a confident beautician even before joining CTEVT. I still work with her and I enjoy doing that. [...] She has given me the responsibility of the whole shop now.’ – B2*

The reasons why women, even when they have to pay out of their pockets to get trained, choose low-income and gender-segregated professions are far from mysterious. Lamichhane (2014) lists five major causes: being barred from higher education, higher responsibility towards household work, high male dominance, low access to information, and low access to financing. These reasons, rather than acting individually, act multiplicatively - forming intersections with one another - and contribute to what Murphy (1986) calls closure and Witz (1990) further specifies as demarcationary closure whereby males occupy – and exclude women from – high-return trades and women are encircled into a distinct sphere of low-return women-friendly trades.

Having entered these professions, and later getting their skills upgraded and/or verified by CTEVT, women were typically employed by more experienced professionals or self-employed by establishing their own small shops. Their level of income, regardless of being employed or self-employed, however, remained extremely precarious. Almost half of the women interviewed had a monthly income of less than NRs. 15,000 (USD 129). Few early-career professionals even had monthly earnings below NRs. 10,000 (USD 86). Putting this into perspective, the monthly national minimum wage of Nepal is set at Nepalese Rupees 13,450 (Poudel, 2019) (approx. USD 116), which means that most women participants of this research had precarious earnings around or even less than what has been prescribed as the national minimum wage of Nepal – an income which is already set at a painfully low level.

This low level of income from practising their profession often led women into looking for additional opportunities of earning money – the most notable of which was seen among some more experienced beauticians and tailors - which was training other women in the same profession as theirs yielding up to 4 times the normal income.

*‘I am always giving training to 2 or 3 women at my shop. Training others is very normal within this profession. Actually, it is impossible to survive in the market without giving training – the income from the shop alone would never be sufficient.’ – B6*

*‘Training other women not only gives me some additional income but also gives other women some skills so that they can do something for themselves and earn some money. I feel very proud that I have trained so many women over the years’ – T5*

In fact, training others was found to be an even higher source of income for women than just working in their shops – generating revenue anywhere between NRs. 30,000 (USD 258) to NRs. 45,000 (USD 387) per student for a 3 – 5 months private course. This meant that several shops established by CTEVT graduates also functioned as a learning centre where other women could come and learn the skills privately – much like how the graduates themselves had started their journey into being beauticians or tailors.

This makes apparent a vicious cycle where for additional income, beauticians and tailors are obligated to draw in more women into these professions who would, then, start their journey, gain some experience, and later have their own private students - thereby, drawing more women into these precarious positions.

Having a great number of women nudged into these professions led to an overabundance of beauticians and tailors offering their services with three unique implications. First, the shops' women opened were unable to scale properly. Many women preferred to have their own shops as it was more liberating. As such, after gaining some months of experience, women would leave their employers/trainers and set up their own small shops. This prevented any shops from growing to a substantial size, taking the shape of an enterprise or drawing scaled income. A second direct implication of the overabundance of vocationally skilled women was an extremely high degree of competition with 2-3 shops providing the same services within a single locality.

*‘If you look there (pointing outside) you will see another beauty parlour. It is a new one. It didn't exist there before, but now it does. So now, we have to compete for the same customer because we both provide the same services.’ – T2*

The third consequence, and something that directly affected the income and the well-being of beauticians and tailors, was how the added competition forced them to lower the rates for their services and work additional hours.

*‘The competition is so high that if I do not offer cheap services, no one will visit my parlour. Nowadays, I only charge NRs. 20 (USD 0.17) for threading. It (threading) looks*

*easy but it is a tough manual job for only 20 rupees. I have been doing it so much for the last 5 years that I have started to develop severe back pains.’ – B3*

This displays layers of economic and even health-related insecurities in the work that beauticians and tailors do. Adding to these layers, come other social insecurities like gender roles, blurring sense of personal and professional life etc., the combination of which makes the jobs of women in these professions extremely precarious (Standing, 2011a).

Starting with gender roles, almost all women were working their jobs not instead of, but in fact in tandem with, their normalized gendered roles in their households. This included cooking 3 – 4 meals for the whole family and doing dishes every day, as well as cleaning the household and doing laundry manually at least 2 – 3 times a week. This is sometimes followed by having to take care of the children and/or the elderly members of the family. This meant that their professional work, their household chores and their caring duties were all joint responsibilities which formed what Standing (2011a: 61) describes as the ‘triple burden’ faced by women.

*‘Saturdays are busy days for me because everyone is home and I have to do more cooking and laundry and everything. So, other days are usually better for working. Usually, by 11 am (on a working day), I am done with the kitchen chores and I am free until 4 pm. So I work in the shop as much as I can during these hours. At 5, the kids come home from school, so I have to be home early to make them some food.’ – T2*

As such, working as beauticians or tailors, oftentimes, came as an additional burden to women in their already busy days. Eventually, many women felt like they were losing control of their time and lives. For some women, this added responsibility also translated into losing control over their space. A participant in this research, who shared that she liked working with her employer and having responsibility for the shop, also shared the following:

*‘I work in the front (of the shop) during the day and sleep here in the back (her room/home) to take care of the shop during the night.’ – B2*

This interview took place in the participant’s home which was a part of a room right behind the shop - separated by a wooden cupboard. This variety of responses shows how beauticians and tailors could be burdened with triple roles, lose control over space and time and essentially be pushed to precarious working as well as living conditions Standing (2011a).

The one theme that also stood out during these interviews and was apparent only after a deep reflection on the notes is the fact that the participants almost always internalised their performance - attributing reasons for failures or low incomes to themselves as opposed to the societal and economic system they were exposed to. Almost always, they believed that there was a way to earn more or reasons to learn more so that they could have it slightly easier.

*'I know I earn very little, but I also know that I could earn a lot more from this profession. The thing is that my husband is sick, and there is no one to look after him. So, I have to make sure that I work only a few hours a day and take care of him for the rest of the time. I really want to work and earn more, but I have no choices.'* – B10

*'In service-oriented professions like ours, the level of income is really subjective. You have to behave in ways that make customers want to come back to your shop. You have to present yourself nicely, talk to them in a friendly manner and make sure that they like you'* – B5

Thus, the women enter into these professions with dreams and hopes of working for themselves and subsequently earning an income. However, they enter into these 'women-friendly' professions still having to prioritise their gender-prescribed cleaning and caring chores. For many women, taking these jobs means adding responsibilities, but it also means earning something (even if it is a small amount) and acquiring skills by stepping outside the private sphere of their homes. Hence, it is very important to analyse how these experiences of firstly, stepping away from the private sphere into the public sphere and secondly, earning an income translate to their social and political positions.

#### *4.2 Extent of Empowerment*

The idea of economic empowerment as a means of women's empowerment has been thoroughly discussed. However, the implication of women's experiences of being 'empowered' is yet to be dissected. For this purpose, elements of the World Bank (2005)'s framework consisting of agency, opportunity structure and degrees of empowerment could be employed. Firstly, the extent of agency can be measured through assets such as psychological, informational, organisational, material, social, financial, or human. Secondly, the opportunity structure (of an actor) is determined by the existence and operation of formal and informal institutions, or game rules. These include the rules, regulations, and social conventions that control how people behave. Whether individuals and groups have access to assets and may utilise those assets to achieve their goals depends on the

existence and operation of official and informal laws, regulations, norms, and practices. Finally, the degree of empowerment is categorised as the existence of choice, use of choice and getting the desired result after the choice (World Bank, 2005).

The above-mentioned framework can be thus used to evaluate to what extent have the attempts to empower women through women-friendly vocations been effective.

*'I had already worked in this profession for more than 25 years and had lots of experience. Yet, many newcomers boasted about their [CTEVT graduation] certificates. I felt terrible and undervalued as if my skills and experiences didn't matter. Skills are skills, aren't they?*

*Anyways, this is why I felt compelled to take the training myself and get the certificate.'*

*– B8*

The above participant had a prolonged experience of being in the profession and had accumulated skills and nuanced understandings of the trade, increasing her informational, organisational, material, social and financial assets. Despite having some forms of agency through these assets, which should, in theory, increase her 'empowerment process', she was still on the outside of the opportunity structure. Having invested more than half of her life in this trade, she still felt a sense of powerlessness - that she was easily disposable - when she did not have a certificate from an organised structure (CTEVT). Her accumulation of social, informational and other assets did not translate into power which should have helped her form a stronghold in the profession. As such, besides being unable to capitalise on her agency acquired through her knowledge and experiences, she also has not been able to assert her place of being a stakeholder in the formation of the social rules surrounding her profession. She has solid grounds for being a skilled professional yet has little or no influence on any controlling structure leaving her precarious and powerless.

The provision of certification, in and of itself, and regardless of its necessity, indicates the presence of what Macdonald (1985) calls professionalisation as a strategy of exclusionary closure. Given that having a certificate did not add to the income or security of women, rather, only acted as a source of validation, even with years of experience, women are still at the mercy of someone higher up in a powerful position deciding what is good for them without factoring them in the decision making of their own fate. The skills they have acquired over the years are not evaluated at a level they

should have been and are looked at in a discounted way - like they are not capable of deciding for themselves.

The absence of trust from the institutions towards women is further evident by the fact that institutions like CTEVT do not offer them any resources or financial assistance to step into the market after completion of the training. None of the participants of this research had received any financial or any other state-level assistance after the training was complete. This perhaps could have been a way to help women overcome the barrier of their limited access to finance.

*'I would love to have a parlour of my own in the future. But the idea of taking loans scares me a lot. I cannot go to banks for loans because I have no assets to keep as collateral. So, I have to ask for money from my family. And doing that is very scary because just in case I fail to pay back, I will always be hated by my family members.'* –

B4

This also is another example to further evaluate the opportunity structure. Although CTEVT as a formal government programme provides women with tools to attain some forms of assets and have more agency through economic empowerment measures, they offer no means by which women could take control over or even benefit from the opportunity structure.

Left at their own devices, women feel that their low income is their fault, which is an internalisation of their performance. Women then have to resort to working longer hours (in order to earn more) and for lesser pay. This internalisation of efforts also translates to women feeling a constant need to learn something new, some other skill or technique, that could perhaps set them apart and increase their income.

*'Oh, I would love to take new courses and expand the range of services in my shop. I have heard of so many new and fancy technologies that have come from Bangkok, but my options are limited. I can neither afford the training nor new technologies ... I wish the state provided these courses for free and gave us these new tools.'* – B12

Whilst the women, themselves, internalise the failure of their ventures as their shortcomings, institutions that are involved in spreading and encouraging women to participate in the labour market have not worked in improving the effectiveness and delivery of their own efforts. No alterations have been made in the programme's designs or organization's structure to address the vulnerabilities that women are facing.

*It does not make me a lot of money, but enough to complement my husband's income in buying some groceries for home and stationery for children – being able to do so makes me happy!' – T1*

Women themselves know that they are not going into the work field to earn a higher income. Even then, women are knowingly and happily entering the field with limited choices. Additionally, the role is seen as 'complementary' to the role of the male household head. This suggests that women primarily see that their role is that of the caretaker. The additional income, albeit low, is welcomed as long as women are able to fulfil their domestic and care duties.

*'I know I earn very little, but I also know that I could earn a lot more from this profession. The thing is that my husband is sick, and there is no one to look after him. So, I have to make sure that I work only a few hours a day and take care of him for the rest of the time. I really want to work and earn more, but I have no choices.'* – B10

The above excerpt not only emphasises a women's care duties but also puts focus on having or not having choices. Having a choice, using the choice and getting the desired result are important factors to determine the degree of empowerment. However, women's choices are limited from the time that they enter the profession. These two vocations are established as 'women-friendly' such that women are able to perform these vocations without having to lose aspects of their 'womanhood'. Women only get to do 'accommodating women-friendly' work outside of their homes after completing their gender-prescribed domestic and care duties. So women take the extra burden, walk the extra mile, do their prescribed domestic work and then only step outside for income-generating work. While their effort is commendable, women quietly doing all the work creates a deficit of role models for younger girls to tell them that there could be an alternative choice to those accommodating women-friendly vocations. Their 'choice' to be involved in these (women-friendly) trades is heavily influenced by the limitation of the scope of their choices as well. Structural barriers of lack of investment in women, along with sociocultural beliefs and values that create a gendered division of labour also limit the choices that women have. Hence, despite being 'given' choices women are still limited in the amount of social, economic and political power that they should have been able to exercise had they been 'empowered'.

Although these vocational training sets out to teach women 'women-friendly' skills, they do not incorporate the experiences and skills of women at the centre for planning. The CTEVT



organizational structure<sup>2</sup> at present has 5 leadership positions, 6 council members, 13 divisional directors and 7 provincial directors and none of them are women (CTEVT, 2023). This structure itself is a representation of how limited women's involvement in the decision-making process that regulates and guides the system for training and bringing new women into these vocations.

Hence, these programmes increase the level of vulnerability and push women away from positions that allow them to decide on what they think is the next best step for their professions. These kinds of efforts to 'empowerment' do not engage in or address the existing socio-cultural and economic patterns that create structural problems of gender inequalities and injustices. The focus is merely on the economic involvement of women, which is not enough for true empowerment processes.

## 5. Conclusion

This research started with questioning the implications of using vocational training as a tool to empower women. In Nepal - where women are often excluded from the formal economy - skilling does bring them to the labour market, but, these so-called '*women-friendly*' professions, like beauticians and tailoring, are extremely gender-stereotyped and yield painfully low incomes. Among these discussions, it was important to bring to the forefront the experiences of women learning and living in these professions and see how and whether or not they felt empowered within it. Based on the experiences of 12 beauticians and 7 tailors, this research finds that these stereotyped professions come with precarious income, added burdens and responsibilities, heightened competition, loss of control over time and space and loss of power and decision-making capacity within their professions.

A primary source of vulnerability for women roots out of the solidified existence of gender roles like cooking, cleaning and caring responsibilities which negatively affects women in two ways. Firstly, it limits women's career choices and compels them to stick to the gender-stereotyped occupations like beauticians and tailors - which, experience has shown - yields extremely low income. Secondly, when women step into the labour market without addressing these gender roles, earning an income becomes not liberating but an added responsibility which strangles women with not two but three

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<sup>2</sup> The organizational structure of CTET keeps changing with the change in government. During the time of research, the entire leadership had one women - Dr. Usha Jha - who played a great role in making this research possible. To follow the current organizational structure go here: <http://ctevt.org.np/who-is-who>

burdens (Standing, 2011a) of household work, caring for and earning for the family. Furthermore, for beauticians and tailors, it was found that because the income from just practising the profession was so low, it was a norm for them to teach other women privately for a fee - which then added to their list of responsibilities now making it a quadruple burden (ibid). These added responsibilities for women meant they were losing their control over time. To save time (and money) some women were even living in the back of their tiny shops - mixing their home and business into the same space - thereby also losing their control over space.

The designs of institutions set up to empower women, precisely to overcome their insecurities, also often reinforce limitations for women. CTEVT, I/NGOs and several local-government offices, for example, limit women by actively promoting the idea of 'women-friendly' training programmes thereby limiting the sense of choice women have. Furthermore, these institutions also fail to provide any institutional support after the training programme like access to finances or entrepreneurial support which could help women get established within their professions. After the training, women are often left to be on their own competing in an oversaturated market with high competition - forcing them to work for cheap prices and/or work extra hours - both of which directly contribute to women having adverse health consequences. A second alternative for more experienced women to earn more is to offer private training services to other women, which also in the long run, is counterproductive as it adds to their own competition in an already oversaturated market. All of this evidence shows that even the designs of institutions and their economic empowerment efforts have a big element in being burdensome towards women.

In addition, women working in 'women-friendly' vocations also experience a loss of power due to the limiting structure of these vocations. The precarious conditions related to income and health already puts women at a disadvantage. Furthermore, women do not get to have a say or exhibit any control over mechanisms that affect their work, income or organisational structure. The sense of powerlessness is furthered by the existence of no choice or limited choice (of entering into the labour market through women-friendly vocations). CTEVT, which makes decisions for the beautician and tailoring vocations, do not involve any women practitioner with experience in its decision-making committees - completely disregarding women's long experiences of working as women in these so-called 'women-friendly' vocations. Therefore, efforts of empowerment should expand beyond economical aspects and address structural issues to bring the desired result.

What these findings imply is that when existing programmes from responsible institutions like CTEVT are built around these stereotypes - as opposed to crushing them - it further reinforces the stereotypes. Training of women in 'women-friendly' skills is not merely enough to claim that women are now 'empowered'. Special attention must be given to their post-training experiences - helping them successfully set up their careers in a respectful, dignified and also profitable manner. This might include funding women's business initiatives, providing them entrepreneurial support, bringing them more into the decision-making process about their own professions etc.

Furthermore, the findings of this paper also hint that it is high time for development actors to remove stereotyping of professions as 'women-friendly' entirely. Institutions must stop harmful stereotypes, not uphold them, and it is proven through this study that the prevalence of 'women-friendly' trades as a stereotype has significant drawbacks. This also opens up possibilities for future research as to what alternatives exist to better empower women - especially those who were left out of the formal education system. This research emphasises, meanwhile, that any such future initiatives of empowering women must break the stereotype that women's work should be built around their gender roles and their incomes should only supplement their husband's income. It should aim to include women in the formal labour market in secured employment, with dignified income and decision-making positions within their professions.

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