

**Women's empowerment through homestay tourism in rural
Nepal: A comparative analysis of resources, agency, and
achievements.**

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Abstract

This dissertation critically examines the role of homestay tourism in promoting women's empowerment in rural Nepal by comparing four communities: Sirubari, Lwang Ghalel, Ghale Gaun, and the Tharu settlements. Guided by Kabeer's (1999) empowerment framework of resources, agency, and achievements, the study explores how women's engagement in homestay tourism influences income generation, skill development, financial independence, and decision-making power, while recognising the structural constraints that shape these outcomes. It adopts a qualitative research design within the social constructivist paradigm and relies on secondary data from reports by national and international organisations, government policies, and academic literature. Thematic analysis has been applied to identify patterns across different institutional, social, and cultural contexts.

The findings indicate that women's empowerment through homestay tourism is highly context-specific and uneven. Empowerment remains limited in contexts characterised by patriarchal norms, weak institutional support, and seasonal tourism. However, communities with inclusive governance structures, cooperative leadership, and access to training demonstrate stronger pathways from income to agency and achievement. The study also highlights that participation in tourism alone does not guarantee empowerment; rather, empowerment occurs when women exercise power over decision-making and economic resources are stable and collectively governed.

This research contributes to gender and tourism scholarship by offering a nuanced, intersectional understanding of empowerment in rural tourism contexts. It provides useful insights for policymakers and development professionals seeking to establish more inclusive and equitable homestay tourism initiatives in Nepal.

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Attestation of Authorship

“I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor used artificial intelligence tools or generative artificial intelligence tools (unless it is clearly stated, and referenced, along with the purpose of use), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.”

Signed:



Name: Ambika Gurung

Date: 31/01/2026

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	<i>i</i>
Acknowledgements	<i>ii</i>
Attestation of Authorship	<i>iii</i>
1 Introduction	1
1.1 Personal Background	1
1.2 Background of the Study	2
1.3 Women and Tourism.....	3
1.4 Research Aim and Objectives	5
1.5 Importance of the Study	6
1.6 Structure of Dissertation	7
2 Literature Review	9
2.1 Introduction.....	9
2.2 Women’s Employment and Challenges in the Tourism Industry	10
2.2.1 Women’s Empowerment and Tourism.....	11
2.2.2 Recent Initiatives and Benefits of Women’s Empowerment in Tourism	12
2.2.3 Intersectionality and Barriers to Inclusive Empowerment in Tourism	13
2.3 Homestay Tourism and Community-Based Tourism	15
2.3.1 Homestay Tourism in South and Southeast Asia	15
2.3.2 Benefits of Homestay Tourism for Local Communities	16
2.3.3 Challenges and Issues in Homestay Tourism	17
2.4 Significance of Rural Tourism in Nepal	19
2.4.1 Women and Tourism in the Rural Nepal Context.....	19
2.4.2 Challenges of Rural Tourism in Nepal	20
2.4.3 Ensuring Sustainable and Inclusive Rural Tourism	21
2.4.4 Summary of Literature Gap	21
3 Research Design and Methodology	23
3.1 Introduction.....	23

3.2	Research Paradigm: Social Constructivism.....	23
3.3	Research Approach and Design	24
3.4	Data Sources and Collection	25
3.5	Sampling and Case Selection	26
3.6	Data Analysis	28
3.7	Limitations.....	32
3.8	Ethics	32
3.9	Reflecting on Positionality	33
3.10	Conclusion	33
4	<i>Findings and Discussions</i>	35
4.1	Introduction.....	35
4.2	Income Generation and Financial Stability Through Homestay Tourism	35
4.2.1	Homestay Tourism as a Primary Source of Women’s Income.....	36
4.2.2	Economic Role Diversification	38
4.2.3	Control Over Earnings.....	39
4.2.4	Seasonality and Financial Stability.....	40
4.2.5	Linking to Kabeer’s Framework: The Income to Empowerment	40
4.2.6	Broader Economic Impacts.....	42
4.2.7	Summary.....	43
4.3	Skills Development and Entrepreneurial Opportunities.....	43
4.3.1	Capacity Building Through Homestay Operations.....	43
4.3.2	Language, Leadership, and Entrepreneurial Skills	44
4.3.3	Entrepreneurial Capacities and Innovation	45
4.3.4	Link to Empowerment Outcomes.....	47
4.3.5	Summary.....	47
4.4	Financial Independence and Decision-making Power	47
4.4.1	Household Autonomy and Control Over Earnings.....	48
4.4.2	Participation in Community Financial Decisions.....	48
4.4.3	Savings, Loans, and Investment Decisions.....	49
4.4.4	Linking to Kabeer’s Empowerment Framework	50
4.4.5	Summary.....	51
4.5	Structural Barriers to Empowerment.....	51

4.5.1	Gender Norms and Patriarchal Constraints	52
4.5.2	Caste-based and Social Exclusion	52
4.5.3	Education and Skill Gaps.....	53
4.5.4	Infrastructure, Accessibility, and Market Barriers	54
4.5.5	Linking to Kabeer’s Framework	55
4.5.6	Summary.....	55
4.6	Comparative Analysis Across Four Communities	56
4.6.1	Patterns of Empowerment and Economic Resources	56
4.6.2	Caste, Gender, and Decision-making Power.....	57
4.6.3	Geographical Accessibility and Exposure.....	58
4.6.4	Shared Achievements and Remaining Gaps	58
4.6.5	Summary.....	60
4.7	Chapter Conclusions.....	61
5	Conclusion.....	62
5.1	Introduction.....	62
5.2	Research Questions Review	62
5.3	Comparative Analysis of Empowerment Conditions Across Communities.....	64
5.4	Implications	66
5.4.1	Theoretical Implications	66
5.4.2	Practical Implications.....	67
5.5	Limitations.....	67
5.6	Overall Conclusions and Future Research.....	68
6	Appendix A: Secondary Data Sources Analysed	81

List of Figures

Figure 1: Map of Nepal.....	3
Figure 2: Gurung Women in the Sirubari Homestay Welcoming Guests	4
Figure 3: Tharu women performing the Lattha dance	4
Figure 4: Six-phase Thematic Analysis Process.....	28
Figure 5: Thematic Framework Linking Themes to Kabeer’s Empowerment Framework.....	31
Figure 6: Income Empowerment Pathway.....	41

List of Tables

Table 4.1: Comparative Income Generation Patterns Across Four Communities.....	37
Table 4.2: Training and Entrepreneurship Patterns Across Four Communities	46
Table 4.3: Women’s Financial Independence Across Four Communities	50
Table 4.4: Structural Barriers Across Communities	54
Table 4.5: Comparative Empowerment Levels Across Four Communities.	59
Table 5.1: Synthesised Empowerment Conditions Across Four Communities.....	65

1 Introduction

1.1 Personal Background

As a Nepali researcher, I have always been conscious of the important but often overlooked role that women play in upholding rural communities and households. My keen interest in acquiring more knowledge of women's lived experiences has developed through observing how they manage domestic tasks, agricultural work, and cultural norms, despite often lacking representation in formal economic situations. This awareness was strengthened by my visits to homestay communities and interactions with women involved in hospitality, cultural activities, and community tourism that highlight their resilience and the challenges they face. As well, I am blessed to come from a family that has continually motivated me to pursue academic goals and education, enabling me to explore how tourism can create opportunities for women to further their learning. However, I am also conscious that many women in rural Nepal continue to face challenges shaped by caste structures, social norms, and restricted access to resources, which hinder many from taking advantage of tourism opportunities.

My desire to critically examine how homestay tourism impacts women's empowerment in Nepal was inspired by these personal observations. While homestay programmes have become an integral component of rural development, the opportunities they provide vary substantially across caste, ethnic, or geographic groups. Therefore, this study aims to investigate how homestay tourism supports women in four communities: Sirubari, Lwang Ghalel, Ghale Gaun, and the Tharu settlements, all of whom have access to resources, improve their agency, and contribute to meaningful achievements.

This dissertation explores how women's engagement in homestay tourism affects income generation, skill development, financial independence, and experiences of structural barriers. This is guided by Kabeer's (1999) empowerment framework, which conceptualises empowerment as a process of involving access to resources, the ability to exercise agency, and the achievement of meaningful outcomes. The study provides an in-depth understanding of how tourism both encourages and restricts the empowerment process in rural Nepal by examining four distinct community contexts. The findings aim to support more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable rural development initiatives while contributing to gender and tourism scholarship.

1.2 Background of the Study

Nepal, a landlocked country between India and China, is unique for its remarkable geographic, cultural, and ethnic diversity. Rural tourism plays a crucial role in Nepal's tourism and development objectives because the majority of Nepalese live in rural areas with rich cultural heritages; however, they are constrained by limited economic prospects (Kafle, 2022). It has been viewed as a method to enhance livelihoods, generate income, and integrate sustainable development goals with cultural preservation (Badal & Adhiakri, 2024; Kafle, 2022). Nepal's socioeconomic life relies on rural communities. Women in these regions continue to face persistent challenges to empowerment. Caste-based structures, patriarchal norms, and limited access to resources and education have pushed many women into unpaid housework and agriculture, where they hold little power over decision-making or earnings. According to the UNDP (2020) report, rural women experience a greater level of inequality compared to urban women in terms of education, income, and public life—this underscores the need for women's empowerment as both an economic necessity and an equal opportunity.

Tourism has been promoted as a platform for women's empowerment and a means to diversify rural economies. Compared with many other industries, tourism generates profits from the use of natural landscapes, cultural heritage, and community engagement, thereby providing women with opportunities to explore new careers (Gautam, 2011; Upadhyaya, 2019). In Nepal, community-based tourism, particularly homestay tourism, has grown to become one of the most inclusive tourism approaches. Regmi et al. (2023) noted that homestay tourism can expand household income, develop community resilience, and preserve culture, placing women at the core of hospitality and cultural activities. The participation of women in homestay tourism is a complex issue. They host guests, prepare food, create handicrafts, and perform cultural tasks—all are a crucial part of the tourism experience. These roles may help women build confidence and social recognition. Women's participation in homestay programmes builds vocational and technical skills, entrepreneurship, and hospitality, thereby improving their capacity to participate in community decision-making (Kanel et al., 2025). Similarly, Palikhe (2018) highlights how women's engagement in Pokhara metropolitan city raised small-scale tourism businesses that contribute to their household income and expanded into community roles. However, the outcomes

of empowerment can differ. Caste-based discrimination, lack of training, and low confidence while dealing with guests are the challenges still faced by marginalised women; including Dalits, people from historically marginalised caste groups placed at the lowest level of Nepal's caste system (Deagon et al., 2021).

Women's participation in tourism is further affected by Nepal's rural demographics and geographical disparities. As noted by Tamang (2022), women from marginalised caste or ethnic backgrounds have limited choices due to Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) strategies, which often significantly benefit privileged communities. This indicates that, being considered as a universal outcome, women's empowerment must be evaluated across different community contexts. This diversity is illustrated in this dissertation with the four case study sites: Sirubari, Lwang Ghalel, Ghale Gaun, and Tharu settlements. These communities include both the hill and Terai regions and reflect different cultural traditions and tourism development routes. For instance, Sirubari is one of the first to establish homestays, while others continue to struggle with insufficient facilities, persistent social exclusion, and unequal benefits.

Figure 1: Map of Nepal

(Image removed due to copyright restrictions)

Note. Map of Nepal by Electoral Constituency Delineation Commission (ECDC), 2017.

As shown in Figure 1, Nepal spans both highland and lowland areas and is divided into seven provinces and 77 districts. This geographical breakdown shows how cultural and regional contexts, along with gender and caste, influence empowerment opportunities in the tourism sector. Although homestay tourism offers an important path for women's empowerment in rural Nepal, its impacts are still affected by social hierarchies and geographic diversity. This study examines these dynamics with a comparative evaluation of the four distinct communities.

1.3 Women and Tourism

Women face being significantly impacted by tourism, particularly in rural Nepal, where female labour is crucial to hospitality, cooking, cultural events, and handicrafts. The tourism sector is known as one of the major employers for women globally, offering them clear career possibilities in leadership, entrepreneurship, and service (UNWTO, 2019). Homestay programmes in Nepal

allow women to host tourists, preserve cultural heritage and support households, thereby relating tourism to empowerment (Acharya & Halpenny, 2013).

Gurung women in Sirubari highlight this connection by performing a key role in welcoming guests. To show respect and cultural pride, guests are traditionally presented with garlands, tika (a mark put on the forehead for symbolic purposes), and warm greetings (Kandel, 2011). Furthermore, as part of standard hospitality, these practices have attracted tourists seeking genuine cross-cultural relationships. Taking a role in such activities, Gurung women demonstrate how tourism provides a chance to represent their community, build up local identity, and improve their status in their home and village (Acharya & Halpenny, 2013; Kandel, 2011).

Figure 2: Gurung Women in the Sirubari Homestay Welcoming Guests

(Image removed due to copyright restrictions)

Note. Picture by Kandel (2011).

Similarly, women play an integral role in the Tharu community, representing their culture and transmission through dance, music, and regular rituals. The Lattha dance is commonly performed at festivals and social programmes, reflecting the Tharu people’s symbolic identity and their daily lives (Archarya et al., 2008). These dances serve as a way for women to share their traditions and promote community pride when they entertain for guests. This performance also shows how tourism may offer women an opportunity to take important and prestigious roles, which encourage economic opportunities and cultural continuity (Archarya et al., 2008; Woli, 2022).

Figure 3: Tharu women performing the Lattha dance

(Image removed due to copyright restrictions)

Note. Picture by Thapa (2024).

Despite all these empowering examples, many women do not benefit equally from participating in tourism. A history of caste-based discrimination has always restricted their access to resources, training, and leadership roles. In Nepal, Dalit women remain among the most marginalised groups (Sapkota, 2020). Dalit women are often excluded from these structures, although community-

based tourism has allowed them to host guests and participate in decision-making (Deagon et al., 2021). However, Sapkota (2020) suggests that inclusive initiatives, such as those in Ghale Gaun, show that Dalit women can actively participate in and benefit from homestay tourism when deliberate efforts are taken to bring down caste barriers.

While existing literature emphasises the potential benefits of homestay tourism for promoting women's empowerment, there remains a significant knowledge gap in how these opportunities are unevenly accessed and negotiated across different social and cultural groups in Nepal. Additionally, limited focus has been given to how caste, class, and education impact access to these opportunities or whether financial benefits lead to long-term empowerment. Addressing these gaps requires a specific study into women's engagement in homestay tourism, particularly in rural communities. The aim and objectives of this study are outlined in the following section.

1.4 Research Aim and Objectives

The main aim of this research is to critically analyse how homestay tourism promotes women's empowerment in rural Nepal, with a focus on the Sirubari, Ghale Gaun, Lwang Ghalel, and Tharu communities. Based on Kabeer's (1999) empowerment framework (resources, agency, and achievements), this study seeks to explore the way in which homestay tourism supports skill development, economic independence, and women's control over personal and community decision-making. To achieve this aim, the study seeks to analyse how homestays contribute to women's financial stability, analyse the skills and entrepreneurial opportunities women develop, consider structural barriers, examine varying levels of financial independence and control over household decision-making, and suggest ideas for more inclusive empowerment.

Here, structural barriers refer to highly rooted social and institutional constraints that could restrict women's ability to benefit equally from homestay tourism, such as caste-based discrimination, patriarchal gender norms, limited access to education and training, and insufficient market or infrastructure support.

Based on this aim and objectives, the study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: How does homestay tourism contribute to income generation and financial stability for women in Lwang Ghalel, Sirubari, Ghale Gaun, and Tharu communities, and what challenges or inequalities affect these outcomes?

RQ2: What skills and business opportunities can rural women living in selected homestay communities in Nepal gain through homestay tourism, and what obstacles restrict these benefits?

RQ3: In what way does homestay tourism influence women's financial independence and control over household resources in Nepal's rural homestay communities, including both enabling and constraining factors?

1.5 Importance of the Study

The importance of this research lies in providing insights into how homestay tourism may serve as a major path for women's empowerment in rural Nepal. Although tourism is widely recognised as a sector with significant ability to promote gender equality and reduce poverty, its effects are diverse and typically Context-specific. Caste-based discrimination, deeply rooted patriarchal norms, and limited access to education are multiple problems faced by women in Nepal. This study is important because it provides an in-depth evaluation of how women in culturally diverse societies both deal with these barriers and benefit from homestay opportunities. The study addresses a major gap in the literature and land policy practice on the intersection of gender, culture, and sustainable tourism development.

From a developmental perspective, this study is crucial because it supports Nepal's national strategies that promote community-based tourism for inclusive economic growth. MoCTCA (2020) stated that homestays are a method of conserving cultural heritage, reducing out-migration, and diversifying rural livelihoods. However, there is a lack of empirical data regarding how these programmes impact women's agency in households and communities. This study offers a theoretically grounded analysis that examines not only the economic impacts but also women's agency and achievements, by using Kabeer's (1999) empowerment framework as an analytical lens. These aspects are often overlooked in conventional tourism studies.

This study examines empowerment outcomes across different social groups, making it important for policy and practice. Recent studies show that when gender, caste, and class issues are not addressed critically, community-based tourism may deliberately reinforce existing hierarchies (Hernández-González & Espeso-Molinero, 2025). In the context of Nepal, scholars point out that caste-based inequality often hinders Dalit women and women from other marginalised caste and ethnic groups from experiencing the same opportunities as women from the higher castes (Deagon

et al., 2021). While Dalit and other marginalised women remain excluded from tourism projects, high caste women are likely to benefit in many rural settings. Therefore, the results of this research may direct more equitable policy actions, ensuring that homestay tourism creates possibilities for Dalit and other women instead of perpetuating caste and caste-based inequalities.

Globally, this research enhances the discourse on tourism and sustainable development goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). International organisations such as the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) emphasise that tourism must empower women as leaders, entrepreneurs, and decision-makers, besides providing economic benefits (UNWTO, 2019). By examining Nepal's experience in the broader context of tourism as a tool for social transformation, this study directly focuses on these objectives.

Therefore, the importance of this study lies in its ability to influence academic debate, direct policy choices, and boost communities. It highlights the opinions or viewpoints of rural women whose everyday lives are frequently overlooked in tourism studies. I strongly agree with Scheyvens and Biddulph (2018), that empowerment in tourism should be determined not only through income but also through autonomy, trust, and decision-making, which this study seeks to highlight and expand on.

1.6 Structure of Dissertation

This dissertation is divided into five chapters, each with a distinct purpose to address the key questions and research objectives. The research context, background, problem statement, research aims and objectives, and an overview of the dissertation structure are outlined in Chapter 1: Introduction. In Chapter 2, a review of relevant literature on women's empowerment, gender and tourism, homestay tourism, and rural tourism in Nepal is applied to Kabeer's empowerment framework, in order to establish the theoretical foundation for the study. The third chapter discusses the research design and methodology, including the research paradigm, data sources, analytical techniques, and ethical concerns. In chapter four, the research findings are presented and discussed, combining empirical evidence with relevant literature to examine women's empowerment outcomes in the four selected communities. The fifth and final chapter concludes the dissertation by synthesising the key findings, explaining the implications, acknowledging limitations, and providing recommendations for future research, practice, and policy.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The concept of women's empowerment has become a vital component of sustainable development, especially in places where structural inequalities hinder women's access to social and economic capital. Homestay tourism has gained attention in rural Nepal as a community-based model that provides a fundamental platform for women's empowerment, while also supporting local livelihoods. Rural women gain access to assets, skills, and agency in their households and communities, assuming tasks such as hosting, decision-making, and entrepreneurship. This correlates with Kabeer's (1999) empowerment framework, which focuses on the interaction between resource access, agency in decision-making, and autonomy. Furthermore, global literature suggests that homestay tourism may be employed to advance gender equality and women's empowerment (UNWTO, 2019). Additional study is required to examine in what way homestay tourism impacts or limits these empowerment outcomes, especially in particular cultural and geographic contexts such as Nepal. Despite the known beneficial experiences, the exact nature of homestay tourism as it relates to the empowerment of individuals in Nepal remains context-specific and unclear. Caste-based exclusion, patriarchal norms, lack of education, and limited access to training are some of the structural barriers that will continue to impact how empowerment is experienced among different ethnic groups. In addition, current research often overlooks broader aspects such as leadership, voice in community governance, and long-term social mobility, while mainly focusing on economic variables and spatial factors such as income generation.

This literature review critically examines the theoretical framework and empirical studies that support the concept of the interrelationship between homestay tourism and women's empowerment. It emphasises significant gaps and insights that will guide the study of four culturally distinct communities: Sirubari, Ghale Gaun, Lwang Ghale, and Tharu settlements. A comparative lens is adopted alongside intersectionality and empowerment theory. The review aims to begin with the challenges women experience in employment and achieving empowerment in the tourism sector globally, then proceed to assess intersectionality and difficulties to inclusion and homestay tourism in the context of rural development in Nepal. This directly enhances the research questions guiding this study, which focus on how homestay tourism enables women to generate income, skills development, and self-dependence.

2.2 Women's Employment and Challenges in the Tourism Industry

Gender inequalities and societal challenges for empowering women are characterised by their role in the tourism industry. Women contribute to the majority of the tourism workforce globally, approximately 54% tend to work in the lowest wage, least stable jobs, such as wait staff, vendors, and housekeepers (UNWTO, 2019). According to Baum (2013), despite women making up 60 to 70% of the labour force in tourism, women are more likely than men to be employed in low-paid and unskilled professions (Torres-Rahman, 2020). However, due to this vertical gender segregation within organisational hierarchies, greater numbers of women are in lower positions and informal roles with fewer benefits or protections, and are significantly underrepresented in leadership roles and decision-making. For example, the UNWTO (2019) data shows that women earn approximately 14 to 15% less than men. Furthermore, an estimated 23% of tourism leadership roles, such as administrative or corporate board positions, are held by women. According to De Jong and Figueroa-Domecq (2022) increasing women's participation rates alone will not reduce structural disparities unless gaps in leadership and governance are solved. The tourism industry can often be uncertain, rather than an empowering sector for many women, because the roles typically assigned to women often reflect domestic duties that lead to informal or part-time jobs characterised by insufficient security, low wages, and limited opportunities for career development (Foreman, 2023). These factors might unexpectedly make tourism jobs challenging and unsustainable for women, even though this sector is often recognised for providing accessible entry-level opportunities.

Additionally, there are many issues regarding women's safety and well-being in tourism-related work. For example, research (e.g., Baum, 2013; Cole, 2020) has found frequent sexual harassment and exploitation within tourism and hospitality professions, where female workers are considered vulnerable due to disparities in power and a "Customer is King" mindset (Torres-Rahman, 2020). A culture of silence associated with gender-based violence in the tourism and hospitality industry continues to increase, with the knowledge that women working on the front lines, in bars, and at entertainment events often face abuse or harassment from customers or managers. However, the women may tend to remain quiet, fearful of losing their jobs or experiencing social judgement; in cases of misconduct (Foreman, 2023). Although tourism is often regarded as an example of empowering women, the reality is more complex. Since the fundamental disparities in power,

wages, and employment have not been resolved, high rates of participation have failed to result in equitable outcomes. As Alarcón and Mullor (2018) have noted, a higher number of women employed in the tourism sector does not always indicate a reduction in gender gaps. To achieve gender equality, the tourism industry must eliminate pay gaps, enhance working conditions, offer training and guidance, prevent harassment, and encourage women into leadership roles; simply increasing the number of women working in the industry is insufficient (De Jong & Figueroa-Domecq, 2022).

2.2.1 Women's Empowerment and Tourism

Empowerment refers to a process that enables individuals, particularly women, to develop the capacity to access resources, exercise agency, and achieve significant life objectives (Kabeer, 1999). Women's empowerment through tourism, particularly in rural areas, has become a crucial means for improving their economic, psychological, and social welfare. Women's empowerment refers to the capacity to create strategic life actions or achieve financial autonomy in situations where they previously lacked such authority (Abril, 2009). In the tourism context, this indicates that women working for the company have control over their income, private decisions, and opportunities. According to a global report (UNWTO, 2019; *UNWTO Puts out Global Report on Women in Tourism, Second Edition*, n.d.), a higher proportion of women work in the tourism industry compared to many other economic sectors and industries, such as hospitality, tour guiding, food service, and handicrafts. In reality, one of the industries with the largest number of women entrepreneurs is the tourism industry, which enables women to start small businesses that provide services to tourists, such as accommodation, guiding, handicraft production, and food services (UNWTO & JICA, 2023).

Women typically allocate a significant portion of their income to their families, covering expenses such as food, medical care and, most importantly, their children's education, resulting in better nutrition, education, and opportunities for the coming generation (McCall & Mearns, 2021). Women often acquire more power in household decisions and a stronger voice in the community because they experience greater financial stability and confidence from their participation in tourism work or organisations (Montoya, 2024). Similarly, in areas of India and Pakistan, the number of women-run guest houses and cafes has been increasing, traditional perceptions about women working outside the home have been challenged, and women have become successful in

taking active business roles (Sulaj & Themelko, 2024). Considering that homestay tourism is viewed as a potential means for empowerment in rural Nepal, it is important to understand how tourism may enhance women's resources and achievements. Therefore, the gender inequality and challenges that persist in keeping women from engaging in tourism are addressed in the next section.

2.2.2 Recent Initiatives and Benefits of Women's Empowerment in Tourism

Over recent decades, women's empowerment in the tourism sector has had multiple benefits, with a growing worldwide effort to foster gender equality. The UNWTO (2019), along with other international organisations, argues that tourism can help achieve sustainable development goals, particularly those related to gender equality and SDG5 on women's empowerment (Mekong, 2019). Many countries, NGOs, and government agencies have developed initiatives for women's skill development, leadership, and tourism entrepreneurship. Similar programmes have been implemented in Asia to train women entrepreneurs and to incorporate rural women into tourism markets through public-private partnerships (such as India's SEWA Airbnb project) and regional collaborations (such as the 2018 APEC women in tourism dialogue). This global trend is an example of the knowledge that empowering women in tourism is not only an issue of rights but also business ethics (UNWTO, 2019). Many community-based tourism programmes and social businesses in countries like Vietnam, Cambodia, and China's Yunnan province are empowering women by assigning them to roles such as craft production, culinary instruction, homestay management, and cultural guiding, resulting in the enhancement of visitors' experiences and preservation of cultural assets (Hoang & Le Minh, 2025).

The UNWTO report (2019) also highlights that women who engage in tourism and maintain leadership roles often invest in their communities and families, as seen in Ghana's Sirigu Women's Organisation of Pottery and Art (SWOPA). The women's increased earnings have allowed them to support their children's health and education, as well as to gain more trust within their families and communities to become more involved in community decision-making and traditionally male-dominated spaces (UNWTO, 2019). These examples show the significance of the empowerment framework for rural Nepali women, highlighting how specific initiatives may strengthen women's skills, confidence, and leadership in tourism. The following section employs an intersectional

perspective that looks at barriers such as caste, class, and education to better understand why all women have not benefited equally.

2.2.3 Intersectionality and Barriers to Inclusive Empowerment in Tourism

In developing countries, tourism is often regarded as a tool for women's empowerment. However, an intersectional analysis highlights that not every woman benefits equitably; multiple factors, such as caste, ethnicity, class, education, and marital status, influence distinct outcomes. Thus, in social groups like Nepal, privileged women are more able to benefit from empowerment through tourism opportunities, whereas the marginalised women remain excluded, highlighting the importance of critically analysing who remains marginalised or who is empowered (Deagon et al., 2021b). According to Sapkota (2020), Nepali women from higher status or dominant castes have greater opportunities to access resources, training, and community support, while those from lower castes or minority ethnic groups face discrimination due to social barriers and caste-based prejudice. In a Tharu village, despite the presence of Dalit families, homestays were originally operated by Tharu women because caste-based discrimination restricted Dalit women from participating in tourism-related activities. Instead, proactive anti-discrimination policies and leadership support have enabled Dalit women in Ghale Gaun to host, suggesting that strategic policy and community-level programmes can breakdown traditional caste barriers and promote more equitable empowerment outcomes (Sapkota, 2020).

Recent research shows that women from impoverished backgrounds in Nepal are often unqualified and unsure when dealing with international tourists, particularly because of their limited formal education and experience in public places (Deagon et al., 2021b). Despite these examples of empowerment among higher-caste and more educated women, there is still an ongoing pattern of women from economically poor backgrounds and limited education who often find it challenging to enter the formal tourism workforce; they are generally restricted to low-paid and informal jobs or the production and sale of handmade products, thus limiting their income and social status. This is in contrast with the more advantaged groups (Shivakoti, 2022). These gaps highlight how women's empowerment is strongly associated with socioeconomic status and level of education, with more financially secure women experiencing greater opportunities, while marginalised women are often limited to invisible and undervalued jobs.

Many women's participation in tourism in Nepal is severely restricted with deeply established patriarchal norms and mobility limitations; women who work in public roles such as homestay owners or trekking guides often experience social judgement and disapproval from their family members because these positions are considered as challenging traditional gender roles, particularly within conservative rural communities where male cousins might think such work as inappropriate or disgraceful (B. P. Acharya & Halpenny, 2013; Hillman & Radel, 2022). Researchers define this scenario as "time poverty," which restricts women's involvement in tourism roles that require long hours or public involvement (Rodgers, 2023).

To promote diversity and equity, tourism growth requires an intersectional strategy, as women's identities, including their caste, ethnicity, class, education, marital status, and geography, intersect to create barriers and unique experiences that are not accessible to standard interventions. Tamang (2022) demonstrates how GESI frameworks that ignore these intersecting categories cannot reach marginalised communities such as widows, Dalits, or women living in rural regions, therefore effectively perpetuating inequalities rather than sustaining them. Professionals and researchers in Nepal and South Asia have emphasised the importance of ensuring that women from diverse castes, ethnicities and socioeconomic backgrounds are fairly represented in tourism committees and decision-making bodies (Sapkota, 2020). This may guarantee that Dalit or indigenous women have a voice in the running of the homestay programmes as opposed to higher-status community members making all the decisions. The same situation applies to the creation of partnerships with NGOs and women's groups, which may address societal prejudice by enabling communities to accept women workers or the establishment of support groups for women in tourism to discuss and advocate for their rights (Sapkota, 2020). For instance, research on Nepalese homestays (Sapkota, 2020) demonstrates how local efforts have enabled Dalit women to gain a voice in tourism management, suggesting that empowerment is achieved when inclusion and equity are at the core of development practice. This paper, which examines diverse rural communities in Nepal, is crucial to the recognition of the intersecting factors such as caste, ethnicity, and class that influence women's empowerment (Sapkota, 2020). With these insights, the next section extends to homestay and community-based tourism, providing significant models which both encourage and limit empowerment.

2.3 Homestay Tourism and Community-Based Tourism

Homestay is defined as a form of accommodation that enables guests to stay in the homes of local families and experience the traditions, hospitality and daily activities of the host community (Kafle, 2023). These small-scale initiatives are owned and operated at the household level or community level, effective examples of community-based tourism (CBT) where tourism benefits are preserved on a local level, decision-making is controlled, and direct economic benefits sustain village livelihoods. (Sapkota, 2020). In rural development policy, homestays are often marketed as CBT because they promote sustainable tourism, such as encouraging cross-cultural exchange, protecting cultural heritage, enhancing local businesses, and improving socioeconomic resilience. (Pasanchay & Schott, 2021). Additionally, the research discussed above highlights how homestays distribute income generation across multiple households while preserving local autonomy, thereby contributing to reducing rural poverty.

Homestays have been employed as inclusive tools for rural diversification in developing nations such as Nepal, India, Malaysia, and Thailand. Kafle (2023) highlights the diverse value of homestays beyond monetary profit by describing how Nepal's CBT destinations foster empowerment and heritage conservation. However, a critical view is essential. Homestays can offer opportunities to preserve culture and community development, but if capacity-building is uneven or community governance is weak, they might face issues such as cultural commodification, unequal power dynamics, and environmental impacts. Thus, to be truly empowering and persistent, effective community governance, targeted instruction for women hosts, and safeguards against cultural and resource exploitation must be focused on in both academic discourse and policy execution (Prarthana & Rataj, 2025). The position of homestays within community-based tourism shows how these models can directly benefit women hosts and rural households. The following subsection extends beyond homestay tourism in Nepal to the presentation of ideas acquired from observations in South and Southeast Asia.

2.3.1 Homestay Tourism in South and Southeast Asia

According to Sood et al. (2017), community labelling does not always result in collective benefit due to inadequate adoption and concentrated benefits among selected families, resulting from top-down implementation, inadequate consultation, and different household capacities. Despite the disagreements between how to achieve tourists' comfort needs while preserving authenticity, the

emphasis on the importance of ongoing capacity-building and effective management demonstrates Malaysia's successful long-running homestay experiences. Their initiatives present an example of how established government support, promotional efforts, and host training may convert cultural heritage into livelihood opportunities by generating income and developing cultural exchange through local cuisine, crafts, and traditional performances (Jamaludin et al., 2012).

Beyond Nepal, other countries in South and Southeast Asia illustrate how homestay tourism can promote sustainable growth. For example, Pasanchay and Schott (2021) suggest that community-based homestays in Laos provide an extensive livelihood model aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), focusing on equitable shared benefits and capacity-building within host communities. These indicate how marginalised rural women and households can be empowered when community participation is central and institutional support is consistent. This data confirms the regional trend that effective homestay programmes can encourage women's empowerment and inclusive development outcomes.

Research on Bhutan adds perspective on social capital. In addition, studies show that when local capacity is unevenly distributed or community consultation is limited, participation declines, benefits concentrate, and risks such as environmental damage or cultural commodification rise (Jamaludin et al., 2012; Sood et al., 2017). These global studies demonstrate the fact how homestay governance and design have a major effect on women's empowerment outcomes. This highlights the value of exploring the benefits and challenges at the community-level, not only the opportunities, which are explored in the next section (Pasanchay & Schott, 2021).

2.3.2 Benefits of Homestay Tourism for Local Communities

In addition to the homestay strategy's emphasis on direct household participation and local ownership, which keep income circulating in the village economy, homestay tourism is often associated with delivering local employment and diverse household income in rural Nepal, contributing a positive impact on food security, health care, education, and overall well-being (Kafle, 2023; MoCTCA, 2020). Women's role in household and community decision-making is strengthened through this income, which further enhances their control over financial resources (Palikhe, 2018). Positive labour outcomes for youngsters are supported by evidence from Nepal. By encouraging youth to stay in or return to villages, increasing homestay opportunities may

decrease rural migration (Lamichhane et al., 2024). Similar outcomes are indicated in various government reviews, which point out that new tourism has generated viable alternatives to urban migration (MoCTCA, 2020). In terms of culture, households are encouraged to preserve traditional meals, dances, festivals, and handicrafts, reflecting a desire for “authentic” village life (Kafle, 2023).

When communities understand the dependency of tourism on environmentally clean landscapes, homestay tourism has the potential to promote conservation (MoCTCA, 2020). As part of Malaysia’s homestay programme, in order to maintain the environmental quality, local communities have implemented waste management systems and cleanliness rules (Razzaq et al., 2011). Data from Ghale Gaun, Nepal, indicates that tourism provides 46% of the total income for the wealthiest families and 31.6% for the poorest households, thus showing the importance of social improvements while also raising valid questions about equal benefit sharing (Budhthoki, 2013). These benefits depend on effective leadership because gains might remain focused among a small percentage of well-positioned families: specifically, whether or not capacity-building evaluations, such as training in pricing, hygiene, hospitality, and language, are conducted (Sood et al., 2017). Other research implemented in Malaysia points out that “Community-based” branding does not ensure broad involvement or stable quality standards (Jamaludin et al., 2012). Household and guests’ care duties vary significantly among families, where women’s participation can contribute to an increased workload burden (Acharya & Pandey, 2018). This highlights the importance of connecting leadership opportunities for women with income access to support the empowerment theory (Palikhe, 2018). Overall, homestay tourism in Nepal has proven the capacity to enhance the standard of living, preserve cultural heritage, and encourage environmental sustainability (Kafle, 2023). When the local programmes invest in regular training, benefit-sharing, and locally established guidelines, these outcomes tend to be enduring (MoCTCA, 2020). There is a relevant for the implementation of this model in Nepal because of the benefits of homestays for income, skills and preserving culture are very apparent. However, to fully understand these possibilities, it is equally crucial to recognise the operational and structural constraints of the benefits, which the following section addresses.

2.3.3 Challenges and Issues in Homestay Tourism

Nepal's homestay tourism continues to face significant structural and operational barriers that restrict its opportunities for equitable and long-term growth. The primary challenges are infrastructure and accessibility; namely, poor road conditions make many rural homestay areas difficult to travel to, few transport options exist, and insufficient sanitation services all discourage foreign travellers (Ghimire & Neupane, 2022). An additional issue is the uncertainty surrounding the misunderstandings of the homestays model- in certain areas, homestays are often confused with small lodges or guest houses, therefore creating inconsistent service and reducing the special attraction of the idea of accommodation in the community (Kanel et al., 2024). Many hosts in Lamjung and other districts lack formal training in hospitality training, including language skills, global cooking standards, marketing, and hygiene, all leading to inconsistent guest experiences and low return visit rates (Ghimire & Neupane, 2022; Kanel et al., 2024). Furthermore, empirical research in Dhanakuta district indicates that problems in service delivery, especially in areas of cleanliness and food quality, had a direct effect on visitor perspectives and their ability to choose homestays (Bastola, 2023). Limiting networking and capacity and market restrictions also limit growth. With limited use of digital platforms to reach more consumers, many operators rely mostly on local travel agents or local referrals, which results in different occupancy rates and greater vulnerability to local and global crises such as natural disasters or pandemics (Ghimire & Neupane, 2022).

Research literature on the homestay operation of the Tharu community from a sociocultural viewpoint focuses on the risks of cultural commodification, where fulfilling the expectations of visitors is prioritised, thereby potentially harming authenticity (Tharu, 2023). There are still significant research gaps in Nepali homestay tourism. Currently, there are no long-term studies that examine whether changes such as improved infrastructure, training, or governance contribute to significant improvement in household income, community relationships, or customer satisfaction (Ghimire & Neupane, 2022; Pasa, 2020). Additionally, gender-specific impacts are uncertain; the majority of the studies address women's participation but do not analyse how the benefits are divided among different social groups, nor measure empowerment in detail (Kanel, 2024). These challenges demonstrate why the empowerment advantages provided by homestay tourism cannot be overlooked and need the equal participation of women, effective leadership, and training. Thus, it is important to examine the impact of rural tourism in Nepal.

2.4 Significance of Rural Tourism in Nepal

Homestays are an integral part of rural tourism, helping farmers and craftsmen through direct market sales and enabling them to control and manage their cash earnings (Pasa, 2020; Subedi, 2019). Furthermore, by offering local employment opportunities near home, the small-scale ownership structure of the homestay model encourages jobs for youths in rural regions and may reduce out-migration (Ghimire & Neupane, 2022). However, a critical viewpoint highlights the uncertainties surrounding the outcomes of women's empowerment. The advantages depend on effective governance and local institutional capabilities; however, rural tourism continues to face challenges of uneven customer experiences and due to unclear conceptual understanding, basic service standards, and restricted market access for women hosts to communicate with tourism networks and potential customers (Ghimire & Neupane, 2022; Kafle, 2022).

In many rural areas, studies indicate problems in language, digital marketing, hygiene and hospitality training; these drawbacks make local goods and services less attractive and useful which discourages return visits (Pasa, 2020; Subedi, 2019). Additionally, there are distributional disparities as households with better financial and infrastructural resources, as well as those located in more accessible or popular tourism areas, often receive more bookings; thus, equal and transparent regulations along with inclusive community governance systems are important (Pasa, 2020). These patterns are confirmed with comparable data from South and Southeast Asia: women's participation and community involvement may be efficient controls, but only when accompanied by skill development and open community decision-making (Quang et al., 2024). In Nepal, rural tourism can be a means to enhance livelihoods and preserve culture as well as a business model. The following subsection specifically addresses women and tourism in the rural Nepali context, aiming to situate women's empowerment within this broader context.

2.4.1 Women and Tourism in the Rural Nepal Context

Women often have restricted economic opportunities in a patriarchal rural Nepali society, however, rural tourism provides an important opportunity towards empowerment. Particularly, women-led homestays such as those in Barpak Village (Gorkha district) have given women more

influence in domestic and community affairs as well as income-generating roles; by supporting gender quality, this approach encourages sustainable community development (B. P. Acharya & Halpenny, 2013). Similarly, an ethnographic study carried out in the Mahabharat hills reveals how homestays programmes offer technical and vocational training, increase rural women's confidence, practical skills, and motivate them towards entrepreneurship, even with ongoing challenges like lack of exposure and literacy (Kanel et al., 2025).

Despite these benefits, challenges still exist. Caste, education, and economic status often affect participation with marginalised women, losing opportunities for training or decision-making (Pasa, 2020; Sapkota, 2020). Moreover, women's unpaid domestic work may in fact be caused by increased tourism responsibilities, raising questions about the long-term reliability of empowerment gains (B. P. Acharya & Halpenny, 2013). These example highlights how rural tourism can provide women with new opportunities and access to resources; however, caste and class differences in participation do persist. This shows how important it is to address the structural problems that are discussed in the next section.

2.4.2 Challenges of Rural Tourism in Nepal

Nepal's rural tourism sector has significant potential, while it is also shaped by structural inequality, sociocultural and environmental barriers, and infrastructure problems. As Kafle (2022) observed, slow infrastructure growth, even with favourable procedures and planning, prevents rural tourism from achieving meaningful attraction in remote areas. In addition, a 2024 study highlights the lack of basic guest amenities such as clean bathrooms and resting places, reducing visitor satisfaction and the potential of return visits (Lamichhane et al., 2024). In this study, using a quantitative assessment, it has determined that the infrastructure restrictions necessary for increased visits are insufficient, therefore showing a research gap.

Similarly, issues in policy and management hamper the growth of coherent rural tourism. Fragmented autonomy, insufficient cooperation and underutilised funding sources such as community marketing assistance are highlighted in the 2019 government evaluation report (MoCTCA, 2020). Development is further harmed by sociocultural challenges. Likewise, increasing living costs and unequal advantages have precipitated tensions and competing interests within the Sirubari community (Bhandari et al., 2022). Another issue is seasonality. As per the studies of Ghandruk, visitor rates are strongly dependent on the season's conditions or income

changes during the off-season (Thapa, 2024). While various methods for managing visitor seasonality have been proposed, their efficiency in rural tourism homestay contexts has not received sufficient attention in the literature. These challenges highlight why inclusive governance and sustainable planning are necessary to realise the empowering potential of rural tourism fully. Hence, techniques to ensure Nepali rural tourism is socially inclusive and sustainable are explained in the final section.

2.4.3 Ensuring Sustainable and Inclusive Rural Tourism

Improving community governance, skills, and environmental protection through homestay and village-based programmes is crucial for the preservation and growth of benefits for rural tourism in Nepal. Research from the Annapurna region illustrates that when local people engage in planning, have a link to marketplaces, and have access to training in community-based ecotourism, their household welfare may be enhanced (Bhatta, 2023). This is evidenced by the community homestay programme in Dalla village, Bardiya district. These Tharu women report income, skills and cultural benefits and promote gradual infrastructure, improvements and capacity-building (in hospitality, marketing and languages) in order to preserve quality and diversity (Woli, 2022).

Sustainability depends heavily on environmental management. For example, in the Amaltari buffer zone, the community-managed homestays are dealing with growing resource and waste challenges, which indicates the necessity for visitor education, waste management, and locally executed waste disposal (Dahal et al., 2020). Within the Annapurna conservation area, there is a need for community-participatory visitor limits and ethically guided infrastructure development; research indicates that the social carrying capacity is delicate and that exceeding these thresholds reduces visitor satisfaction and causes stress for the community (Joshi & Dahal, 2019). Overall, the literature suggests that homestay tourism in Nepal operates at the precarious intersection of opportunities for empowerment alongside persistent structural challenges. By applying Kabeer's empowerment theory (1999) to the analysis of the above-mentioned factors this dissertation explores how homestay tourism encourages women in Lwang Ghalel, Ghale Gaun, Sirubari and Tharu communities.

2.4.4 Summary of Literature Gap

Overall, the study suggests that homestay tourism in Nepal enables women to earn income, develop skills, and participate in cultural activities; however, these benefits are not equally

distributed across communities. Studies that are recently accessible usually focus on specific areas or general tourism outcomes, providing limited attention to how caste, ethnicity, geography, and local governance impact empowerment across multiple rural contexts. Furthermore, comparative analyses using Field Kabeer's (1999) framework to examine the interactions among resources, agency, and achievements across different homestay communities remain limited. To address this gap, this study provides a comparative analysis of four distinct rural communities in Nepal.

3 Research Design and Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The methodology chapter outlines the study's data sources, research design, philosophical orientation, and analytical methods, covering a foundation for addressing the objectives and goals in this study. Validity, coherence, and alignment between the research questions and chosen methods can be achieved by maintaining a connection within the research design, analytical process, and the philosophical paradigm (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Mohajan, 2018). Transparency in research design additionally ensures accuracy in methodology by illustrating how the research's theoretical and epistemological frameworks effectively guide data collection and analysis (Kivunja, 2018). Therefore, this section discusses methods of secondary data collection and thematic analysis, as well as explains the adoption of a qualitative case study design within a social constructivist paradigm.

The key objectives of this dissertation are to critically analyse how homestay tourism fosters women's empowerment in rural Nepal, concentrating on four communities: Sirubari, Lwang Ghalel, Ghale Gaun, and Tharu settlements. The study aims to examine women's income generation, skill development and financial independence in the context of structural barriers such as racial prejudice and patriarchal norms, guided by Kabeer (1999) the empowerment framework of resources, agency, and achievements. Hence, the research is guided by three main questions presented in chapter 1 that focus on women's earnings, skills development, and financial autonomy through homestay tourism in rural Nepal.

3.2 Research Paradigm: Social Constructivism

This study is guided by the social constructivism paradigm, which holds that knowledge is generated using social, cultural, and historical context instead of being objective or universal (Ponterotto, 2005). Multiple realities, driven by individual lives and relationships within their communities, are assumed to exist under social constructivism (Ponterotto, 2005; van der Walt, 2020). This paradigm emphasises the evaluation and understanding of different perspectives, in contrast with positivist approaches that seek a single truth. Such a strategy is crucial for research on women's empowerment in Nepal, where caste, ethnicity, geography, and patriarchal social norms all serve as integral parts in determining the outcomes of empowerment.

This paradigm is particularly beneficial because empowerment cannot be measured solely through quantitative metrics. Rather, empowerment is considered a complex and negotiated process shaped by resource access, agency in decision-making, and achievements within structural restrictions (Kabeer, 1999). This theory is illustrated by Kabeer's (1999) empowerment framework, which indicates that empowerment is a dynamic connection between resources, agency, and achievements, not a fixed outcome. In rural Nepal settings, this means accepting that empowerment may take multiple forms, such as women's ability to engage in economic activities, develop hospitality skills, or gain recognition in their households and communities.

Finally, the intersectional lens was initially developed by Crenshaw (1989) emphasises how different cultural groups, such as gender, caste, ethnicity, and class, intersect and impact how each experiences opportunity, power, and inequality. The social constructivist paradigm, which states that reality is socially constructed and experienced differently depending on context, history, and identity, is strongly aligned with this concept (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Ponterotto, 2005). In Nepal's rural homestay context, intersecting identities (e.g., related to Dalit women, ethnic minorities, or lower-income groups) have a major effect on how empowerment is accessed, negotiated, and constrained. The research may proceed by treating "women" as a homogenous category by using this lens within a constructivist paradigm; instead, it can consider empowerment as relational and differentiated, shaped by cultural and structural power hierarchies. This approach supports a deeper analysis of lived experiences within certain rural settings, consistent with interpretivism-constructivism as a methodological perspective (van der Walt, 2020).

In total, the social constructivist paradigm provides an interpretive framework for this study by emphasising multiple realities, context-specific meaning, and intersectionality, which makes it appropriate for exploring how homestay tourism empowers Nepali rural women.

3.3 Research Approach and Design

This study examines women's experiences of empowerment in rural homestay tourism using a qualitative research approach. Qualitative research focuses on creating meaning, interpretation and social complexity, in contrast with quantitative methods that highlight measurement and generalisation (Ponterotto, 2005). It is specifically beneficial in Nepal's context, where empowerment differs according to caste, ethnicity, and geography, therefore requiring attention to cultural meanings rather than numerical universality (van der Walt, 2020).

The intersectional perspective additionally guided the multiple case study design applied in this study. The study selected four communities (Sirubari, Lwang Ghalel, Ghale Gaun, and Tharu settlements) to represent diverse ethnic, caste, and geographic origins because empowerment through tourism is not uniform across Nepal. This makes it feasible to evaluate how intersecting identities impact access to resources, agency, and achievements (Palinkas et al., 2015; UNDP, 2020; UNWTO, 2019). This design is supported by growing evidence that overlapping barriers and enablers linked to identity, opportunity, and power structures regulate women's participation and leadership in the tourism sector (Sapkota, 2020; UNDP, 2020; UNWTO, 2019).

The methodological rationale for qualitative studies is further solidified through intersectional logic, which allows the survey to capture multiple positionalities and community dynamics with their specific socio-political and cultural contexts. According to Mohajan (2018), qualitative research is particularly appropriate for fully analysing such complex social processes.

Furthermore Kabeer's (1999) empowerment framework, which defines empowerment as the combination of resources, agency, and achievements, aligns with the case study design. This framework is applied across four cases that guide the study of women's access to tourism resources and training, their agency and decision-making, and their achievements (which include recognition and financial autonomy). This empowerment framework provides consistency to incorporate contextual variation while maintaining comparability.

3.4 Data Sources and Collection

This study examines the role of homestay tourism in empowering women in rural Nepal using secondary data sources. Secondary data includes peer-reviewed academic literature, government reports, and documents from non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and international organisations, such as the World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). These sources provide evidence of women's involvement in rural development, community-based tourism programmes, and the broader policy framework. The Ministry of Culture, Tourism, and Civil Aviation (MOCTCA) issued the homestay operation guideline 2010 (BS, 2067), which directs the homestay sector in Nepal. Although the entire government document is not accessible to the public, secondary sources confirm that it formalised the framework for homestay guidelines, including their separation into private and community-based models, and the development of operating standards (Adhikari, 2020; Hotel Association

Nepal, 2019; Kafle, 2023). These guidelines are used as an institutional basis for women's participation in the tourism sector, and the UNWTO (2019) provides comparative data on guiding women's tourism internationally, while the UNDP (2020) reports on empowerment levels in small-scale enterprises. The secondary data were collected for this study through an academic database, government publications, NGO and INGO reports, and other relevant sources between June 2025 and January 2026. Most of the secondary data used in this research were available in English. However, during the analysis process, the researcher translated a section of relevant documents that were originally published in Nepali to English.

There are three justifications for employing secondary data. First, it delivers accessibility and depth by covering a range of cultural and geographical settings all over Nepal. Likewise, it offers an array of information connecting statistical summaries with qualitative evidence from case studies and non-governmental organisation (NGOs) reports. Third, secondary data enables comparison, enhancing reliability through assessing and verifying outcomes from government guidelines, academic studies, and NGOs' evaluations (Johnston, 2017). Using multiple secondary data sources, this research outlines the macro-level policy frameworks that influence empowerment, along with the micro-level experiences of rural women.

There are several benefits of using secondary data in this context. Since the data has already been collected and published with ethical approval, it reduces the ethical complexity. This prevents issues connecting with rural communities in a short period or during emergencies such as COVID-19. It also utilises existing reputable data sets, such as peer-reviewed studies, government tourism policies and reports (Khatiwada, 2022; Sapkota, 2020). These reliable and reputable sources provide a solid foundation for the thematic analysis. However, one limitation of employing secondary data is the lack of first-hand reports from rural women's involvement in homestay tourism. To enhance reliability and trustworthiness, this study combines findings from multiple academic, government and non-governmental sources.

3.5 Sampling and Case Selection

Purposive sampling is applied in this study to select four communities as case studies of homestay tourism in Nepal: The Sirubari, Lwang Ghalel, Ghale Gaun, and the Tharu settlements in the Terai. In qualitative research, purposive sampling is appropriate as it allows researchers to precisely identify cases that are rich in information and relevant to the research questions (Palinkas et al.,

2015). Comparative viewpoints on women's empowerment are provided by the selected communities.

This research adopts a comparative case study design. To identify how women's empowerment through homestay tourism differs across ethnic, caste, and geographic contexts in rural Nepal, the four communities are not treated as a single collective case rather they are examined comparatively.

The Gurung community, primarily in charge of Sirubari, located in Syangja district, is widely recognised as Nepal's first homestay destination. It provides an important example of how hospitality and cultural identity have emerged to generate tourism benefits (Kandel, 2011). Lwang Ghale in Kaski district is particularly suitable for exploring intersectionality in the empowerment process since it is notable for its community-based governance structure and inclusion of Dalit households (Sapkota, 2020). Likewise, the homestay area of Ghale Gaun in Gandaki Province highlights the prospects and obstacles for women's engagement in newer initiatives (Khatiwada, 2022). Finally, the Tharu homestays in the Terai region illustrate how historically marginalised ethnic groups have struggled for economic independence and used tourism to preserve cultural practices such as dance and handicrafts (Archarya et al., 2008).

These four communities were selected to represent the ethnic caste and geographic diversity of Nepal. The study examines different social and cultural factors, highlighting the differences between the Terai-based Tharu settlements and the hill-based Gurung and mixed-caste communities. This contrast confirms the credibility of the outcomes on how distinct contexts impact women's empowerment.

The challenges for Dalit women who often face greater disadvantages because of economic marginalisation, gender inequality, and caste-based discrimination receive a particular focus. Since Dalit women experience significant barriers while seeking to access opportunities, their participation in tourism initiatives may be useful as a method for gaining empowerment (Guinée, 2014). This study ensures that the analysis addresses intersectional issues, rather than offering a standard narrative of empowerment by including communities where Dalit households are actively engaged in homestays.

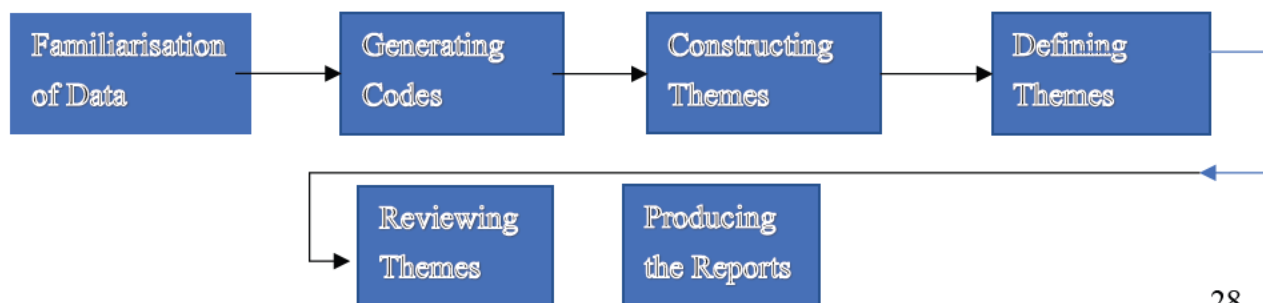
Overall, the study’s capacity to examine how homestay tourism promotes women’s empowerment in Nepal across multiple ethnic, caste, and geographic contexts is enabled by deliberately choosing these four communities, which offer both depth and breadth.

3.6 Data Analysis

The six-phase thematic analysis created by Braun and Clarke (2006) (see Figure 1) is applied in this study to interpret secondary data from government documents, NGOs’ reports and academic papers. Thematic analysis was chosen because it is flexible and supports both a deductive approach grounded in an existing theoretical framework and an inductive exploration of the data. Since the meanings of empowerment differ based on the circumstances and are embedded in social and cultural practices, this adaptability is particularly useful in research on empowerment and tourism. The approach is consistent with the social constructivist paradigm that guides this research, as it acknowledges that knowledge is created through interaction rather than being discovered as a set of unchangeable facts. Kabeer's (1999) empowerment framework, which identifies three dimensions: resources (access to material, human and social capital); agency (the ability to define and act upon goals); and achievements (the outcomes achieved through applying agency), provides theoretical depth to analysis.

Additionally, constructivism supports the usage of thematic analysis as a data analysis approach. While recognising the importance of context and researcher interpretation, thematic analysis helps researchers to automatically identify patterns. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), this technique views meaning as a phenomenon jointly produced by individuals and their environment, resulting in theoretical flexibility and alignment with constructivist beliefs. To identify themes related to income generation, skill development, and financial independence in homestay tourism, thematic analysis will be used to analyse secondary data.

Figure 4: Six-phase Thematic Analysis Process





Note. This image represents the six stages of the thematic analysis approach adopted by Walters, (2016).

Intersectionality serves as an example of how to interpret themes during the data analysis process. The six-step thematic analysis approach invented by Braun and Clarke (2006) was applied in the study to explore how social identities and power dynamics interact to affect empowerment outcomes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Walters, 2016). Instead of considering caste, ethnicity, and gender as different variables, the analysis explored how these factors relate in regular tourism activities, such as how Dalit women might lack access to decision-making spaces even in the same community where Gurung women hold more visible roles. To guarantee that interpretations reflect both lived agency and structural inequalities, these intersections were visualised against Kabeer's empowerment framework of resources, agency, and achievements (Kabeer, 1999).

The main findings enhanced the richness and complexity of this intersectional constructivist approach, which expanded beyond simply descriptive accounts to illustrate how empowerment is unequally distributed across caste, ethnicity, and class lines in rural tourism communities. As highlighted by UNWTO's global gender assessments, it also tackles the growing need in gender and tourism research for context-specific power-aware analysis (UNWTO, 2019).

Stage 1: Familiarisation with the Data

The first stage of analysis involved reading the data and re-reading secondary sources. Preliminary notes were recorded during this process to capture common issues, such as women's recognition in the community, participation in training programmes, household decision-making, and income access through homestays. The aim was to become fully familiar with the content and begin to recognise patterns, not simply to classify. Reflective writing was another component of this step, in which early initial links to Kabeer's dimensions of resources, agency, and achievements were recorded. In addition, ensuring further analysis was based on an advanced awareness of the data, familiarisation built the foundation for exact coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Stage 2: Generating Initial Codes

The second stage consisted of systematically identifying and categorising significant information features. Any relevant passage in the data set was highlighted and assigned a code that reflected its meaning as part of the coding process. For example, references to family opposition were coded as “patriarchal limitations,” or passages describing women generating revenue through tourism were coded as “income from homestay work.” Both latent codes (underlying beliefs, such as gender disparity) and semantic codes (expressed ideas) were used.

Furthermore, the coding combined deduction labels linked to Kabeer’s framework, such as identifying financial control as ‘resources’, leadership training as ‘agency’, and community recognition as ‘an achievement’, with inductive insights which came directly from the data. To enhance accuracy and transparency, a coding log was created.

Stage 3: Constructing Themes

After coding, candidate themes were generated through related codes into broader categories. For example, wages, handicrafts, and food sales codes were organised under income generation; vocational education and training codes were divided under skills development; savings and household financial codes were grouped under financial independence; and codes related to caste discrimination, patriarchal norms, or a lack of financial support were arranged under structural barriers. A draft thematic map illustrating the outcomes of empowerment processes in the tourism sector was produced based on these candidate themes.

Stage 4: Defining Themes

Once the themes were constructed, they were clearly defined and labelled with labels that reflect their key concepts. For example, income generation was defined as women’s ability to obtain financial resources through homestay tourism, skill acquisition as the building of women’s agency through education and capacity, financial independence as an achievement of autonomy and recognition through control over earnings, and structural barriers as institutional and cultural constraints that limit women’s empowerment. By connecting each theme to Kabeer’s dimensions, the analysis skipped description and instead emphasised how empowerment is both facilitated and restricted.

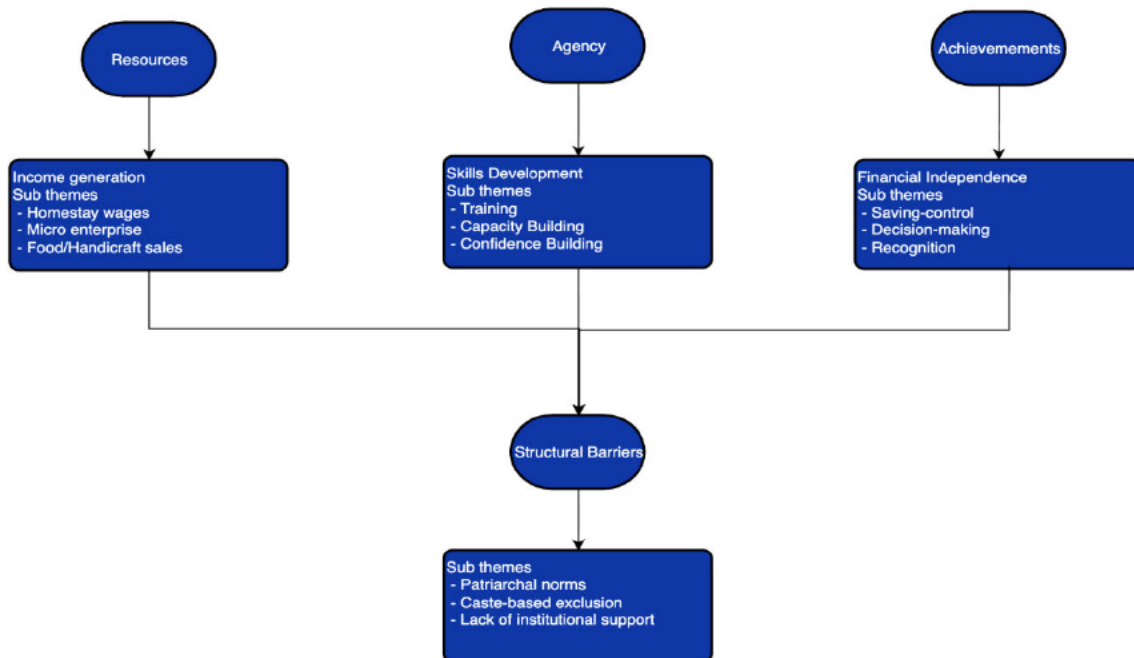
Stage 5: Reviewing Theme

In this stage, the candidate themes were evaluated for coherence and unity. To make sure they generated a unique and significant pattern, all sections coded under each theme were re-examined. Likewise, the entire dataset was reviewed to assess whether the themes accurately captured the overall narrative. Themes were enhanced, and irrelevant codes were removed where overlaps were identified. It ensured that Kabeer’s framework was aligned with the final thematic structure: financial independence and income generation indicate resources, skill abilities linked with agency, and achievements were clear in women’s autonomy and recognition, while structural barriers were accepted as cross-cutting constraints.

Stage 6: Producing the Report

The final phase was to combine the themes into an argument that was logical and clearly addressed the study's objectives. In this stage, data evidence was utilised to highlight the persistent challenges that women face, as well as the empowering aspects of homestay tourism. Each subject was outlined with examples and connected to the theoretical structure, highlighting the way in which resources, agency, and achievements interact to shape empowerment outcomes. This study critically analyses the limitations imposed by structural barriers while also presenting the findings.

Figure 5: Thematic Framework Linking Themes to Kabeer’s Empowerment Framework



Note. This coding framework illustrates how the identified themes and subthemes from the data are organised and connected to Kabeer's (1999) empowerment dimensions of resources, agency, and achievements.

Source. Author's Own work.

3.7 Limitations

Although the methodology for qualitative and secondary data analysis offers a solid foundation for exploring women's empowerment in Nepal's homestay tourism, numerous limitations must be acknowledged. Firstly, the implementation of secondary sources restricts the direct relationship with participants. The analysis focuses on the quality and depth of the resources rather than first-hand information since the data were drawn from published studies, policy documents, and organisational reports. This suggests that recent experience at the community level or specific local characteristics may be shown effectively.

Secondly, there is a certain subjectivity in thematic analysis, considering its flexibility and suitability for interpretive research (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher's interpretations may influence the presentation of empowerment during the coding and theme development process. Transparency and alignment of findings with Kabeer's (1999) empowerment framework aimed to reduce this; however, complete researcher impartiality is unattainable.

Another limitation lies in the situational context of the study. The findings may not apply to other countries or even to urban tourism circumstances in Nepal because they focus on rural communities. Finally, some of the reviewed documents had originally been drafted in Nepali. The researcher translated these sections into English, which means there might be slight differences in meaning.

Despite these methodological limitations, the following chapter, which presents and interprets the study's main findings does rely on a credible base presented with the applied framework and analytical approach.

3.8 Ethics

Although this study only employed secondary data and did not require legal ethics approval, ethical reflection continued to be a crucial part of the research process. To maintain the integrity of the

original authors and the communities they represented, only credible and reputable sources were used, and interpretations were made openly.

The experiences of marginalised groups, including Dalit and ethnic minority women, were not simplified or abstracted. The researcher identified their positionality to ensure cultural sensitivity and to minimise interpretive bias while analysing narratives of empowerment. The study aimed to accurately and ethically express women's experiences through the beliefs of beneficence and respect.

3.9 Reflecting on Positionality

I approach this research from both an emic (insider) and an etic (outsider) perspective, as a Nepali woman from a particular social and cultural background. My inner position is determined by my shared cultural identity, language, and understanding of the caste system, gender norms, and rural community structures, all of which influence women's empowerment in Nepal. Based on shared culture, it helps me to understand more about the variation of social realities and cultural standards established within homestay tourism initiatives.

Additionally, I have an outsider perspective as a postgraduate researcher. My interpretation of women's experience is more structured and analytical, engaging with academic literature, theory, and critical analysis. I understand that my awareness and representation of empowerment narratives are determined by my own identity, education, and social class.

To address this, I used a reflexive approach, often assessing how my perspectives impact the interpretation of data and ensuring that rural women's experiences were equally and effectively represented. Finlay (2002) highlights that to acknowledge the researcher's influence on the development of information, reflexivity is essential. By understanding my positionality, I aim to enhance the research process's credibility and transparency.

3.10 Conclusion

The methodological framework underlying the study has been outlined and justified in this chapter, providing a clear and strong explanation of the research design, data sources and analytical method. Grounded in a social constructivist paradigm, accepts that empowerment is a process that is influenced by context and social structure. Women's empowerment through homestay tourism in rural Nepal has been examined by applying a qualitative research design based on secondary data

from government documents, NGOs' reports, and academic articles. By employing this approach, the study was able to retain its ethical integrity while collecting rich contextual data.

The research was carried out using the six-phase thematic analysis established by Braun and Clarke (2006), which provides an organised structure for identifying and interpreting key trends in the data. Kabeer's (1999) empowerment framework, which guided the interpretation of themes such as income generation, skill development, financial independence, and structural barriers, further strengthened this process. The study's theoretical basis and analytical depth were boosted by linking these themes to Kabeer's dimensions of resources, agency, and achievements.

The chapter concluded by considering the methodological limitations involving language limitations, context specificity, and the application of secondary data. Despite these drawbacks, the methodology provides an accurate framework for the following chapter, which presents and evaluates the main findings. Overall, this methodological chapter presents a detailed and rigorous foundation for proceeding to the analysis and interpretation of outcomes in the next chapter.

4 Findings and Discussions

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the main findings from the research, which are structured around the four primary themes identified through thematic analysis: income generation, skill development, financial independence, and structural barriers. Kabeer's (1999) empowerment framework, which emphasises empowerment as an ongoing process involving access to resources, agency, and the achievement of desired outcomes, served as a guide for developing these themes from secondary data sources. The research shows the complex relationship between tourism and women's empowerment in rural Nepal by recognising both common and context-specific patterns across the four communities: Sirubari, Lwang Ghalel, Ghale Gaun, and the Tharu settlements.

This chapter's thematic structure expands beyond a simple descriptive finding presentation. It critically analyses patterns of empowerment, considering the opportunities and challenges experienced by women across different caste, ethnic, and geographic contexts. For example, Tharu women in the Terai region continue to endure intersecting barriers associated with caste hierarchies and limited access to training opportunities, while Gurung women in Sirubari and Lwang Ghalel have received notable recognition through hospitality roles and collective decision-making (Deagon et al., 2021b; Sapkota, 2020). Similarly, increased participation in Ghale Gaun indicates both persistent structural disparities and an opportunity for new economic growth.

In addition to presenting these findings, this chapter includes an interpretive discussion relating the emerging patterns to appropriate research, as well as analytical components of Kabeer's (1999) empowerment framework.

4.2 Income Generation and Financial Stability Through Homestay Tourism

Since income generation represents the resources dimension of Kabeer's (1999) empowerment framework, women's empowerment becomes a fundamental entry point. Women's engagement in homestay tourism has provided numerous opportunities to generate income, promote household stability, and enhance their positions in the communities of Sirubari, Lwang Ghalel, Ghale Gaun, and Tharu settlements. However, due to variations in caste, community governance, and market exposure, there are major disparities in the quantity, stability, and control over this income.

4.2.1 Homestay Tourism as a Primary Source of Women's Income

In Sirubari and Lwang Ghalel, Gurung women are primarily responsible for hosting guests, managing accommodations, and preparing food. Acharya and Halpenny (2013) noted that women often utilise the earnings to support children's education and household expenses, indicating that tourism income contributes directly to the funding of basic needs for the family. This suggests that homestay tourism enhances women's economic contributions and improves their positions within the family, rather than merely increasing household income. Likewise, as stated by Sapkota (2020, p. 54), "Women take pride in welcoming guests and managing household budgets through tourism income." This increases their confidence and responsibility in making financial decisions. These examples illustrate how homestay tourism enhances women's income and decision-making capabilities. This suggests that rather than remaining a shared or symbolic contribution, income generation enhances household-level agency with women directly controlling homestay operations.

Similar financial outcomes are reported in other rural tourist attractions in Nepal. For example, Dhakal (2023, p. 65) found that for the Chepang Hill Trail, "88 per cent of respondents reported improved business, agriculture, and animal husbandry opportunities due to tourism activities." This deeper analysis reinforces the idea that community-based tourism may broaden rural livelihoods, reduce financial vulnerability, and open pathways for women to engage in economic activity across multiple contexts. This pattern shows that the broader function of tourism acts as an incentive for diversified rural livelihoods, particularly in cases where women actively participate in the economic activities.

However, Ghale Gaun remains in the initial stages of homestay development, which implies women's earnings are still restricted to handicraft sales and domestic duties. This indicates that Ghale Gaun's empowerment processes have begun to develop but are still constrained by restricted market exposure and limited diversification. This means that income generation alone may not be sufficient to ensure substantial empowerment outcomes without established institutional structures. Instead, Lwang Ghalel has established a cooperative benefit-sharing initiative that promotes equal participation and includes Dalit households (Sapkota, 2020). This inclusive governance system supports equitable access to tourism earnings and shared participation. This indicates that inclusive institutional arrangements play a vital role in encouraging marginalised

women’s access to and use of resources related to tourism. This demonstrates how inclusive governance procedures can promote more equitable benefit distribution within the community and enhance access to resources for marginalised caste groups.

In the Tharu settlements, women generate earnings through crafts and cultural performances, but earnings remain quite seasonal, rising during the tourist season and declining sharply during the off-season (Pandit, 2012). This seasonality affects women’s financial security, indicating that tourism offers income opportunities, but structural factors such as tourist demand hinder earnings consistency and reduce the likelihood of broader empowerment. This suggests that although tourism offers income opportunities, women’s ability to convert earnings into sustainable empowerment is constrained by unstable demand and male-dominated control structures.

Table 4.1: Comparative Income Generation Patterns Across Four Communities

Community	Income sources	Level of control	Seasonal stability	Features
Sirubari	Hosting guests, preparing food, and making handicrafts.	High	Moderate-high	Regular tourist flow, strong cooperative structures.
Lwang Ghalel	Hosting, collective fund sharing, crafts.	High	Moderate-high	Inclusive governance involving Dalit households.
Ghale Gaun	Basic hosting, emerging handicraft sales.	Moderate	Moderate	Homestay programme with limited diversification.
Tharu Settlements	Cultural performance, hosting.	Low-moderate	Low-moderate	Rely on seasonal demand. Male-led Income distribution.

Source. Based on the analysis of Kandel (2011), Nepali Folklore Society (2008), Pandit (2012), and Sapkota (2020).

Based on Table 4.1, Sirubari and Lwang Ghalel show more stable and consistent income flows compared to Ghale Gaun and Tharu settlements. This pattern reflects inclusive governance structures and well-established cooperative groups, enabling women to organise their finances and minimise seasonal fluctuations. However, women's ability to transform tourism involvement into stable financial security is restricted by Ghale Gaun's limited organisational maturity and low revenue base.

Similarly, the Tharu communities continue to depend primarily on seasonal cultural tourism, which weakens the outcomes of women's empowerment because of male-dominated income control and unpredictable visitor demand. These findings align with those of Pandit (2012), who pointed out that seasonality and patriarchal norms in the Tharu tourism context hinder women's long-term economic empowerment, and Sapkota's findings (2020) emphasise the value of cooperative governance to improve women's agency.

4.2.2 Economic Role Diversification

Women's engagement in tourism roles beyond hosting roles illustrates the expanding variety within neighbourhoods. In Lwang Ghalel, homestay earnings are invested in livestock and small enterprises through community savings groups, while in Sirubari, women improve their income through selling handicrafts. According to the MoCTCA report (2020, p. 17) "Homestay women in Sirubari have started cooperative savings to manage off-season expenses." This suggests a shift towards more stable livelihood planning. These actions illustrate that diversification enhances women's financial security and empowers them through more informed financial decision-making.

Women in the Tharu settlements continue to earn their income from cultural performances and dance events. Since their income depends on tourists, it is unstable, therefore limiting women's ability to diversify their income and achieve long-term financial security. Even though the community is still developing its homestay structure, Ghale Gaun appears to show early signs of economic growth, as women have begun to participate in handicrafts and basic hospitality. This recent diversification shows that Ghale Gaun remains at an early stage of empowerment, as women's income sources are increasing but are not yet strong or stable enough to ensure financial stability.

Overall, these patterns indicate that women's financial resilience is boosted by economic diversification when reinvestment options and collective savings methods are accessible, empowerment outcomes are limited by reliance on single or seasonal income sources. When comparing the four communities, diversification functions effectively in Sirubari and Lwang Ghalel, where women stabilise their earnings beyond peak tourism seasons through cooperative structures.

4.2.3 Control Over Earnings

Women's level of empowerment is greatly affected by control over income, which varies across the four communities. Women in Sirubari can control their homestay income and make decisions concerning their savings and expenditure through cooperative systems. This shows significant agency because women are not only earning money but also deciding how to spend it and grow their financial independence. Similarly, women in Ghale Gaun generate income, but they have limited control due to male family members. This indicates that, even as women's roles are increasing, their power over financial matters remains restricted by traditional gender norms.

In contrast, Dalit households are enrolled in Lwang Ghalel's benefit-sharing programmes, which encourage equitable income distribution (Sapkota, 2020). This inclusive structure mitigates caste-based differences that often keep women from engaging in financial discussions. In the Tharu settlements, women's influence remains limited, and men generally handle tourism-related income. Women experience unstable income due to seasonal variations, further reducing their bargaining power and limiting their efforts to gain sustainable financial control. These variations indicate that women's empowerment is strongly influenced by their level of control over their own income. Communities with stronger inclusive or cooperative systems give women greater agency, but male-dominated or seasonal income structures keep women in more restricted roles.

Collectively, these findings suggest that to effectively deliver empowerment, women's control over earnings is crucial for transforming economic participation into agency, rather than income generation alone. Among the four communities, male-dominated financial systems continue to hamper women's empowerment in Ghale Gaun and the Tharu settlements. At the same time, cooperative and inclusive governance structures expand women's decision-making power in some communities, particularly in regions with more developed participatory mechanisms and collective leadership.

4.2.4 Seasonality and Financial Stability

The reliability of women's tourism earnings is greatly impacted by seasonal variations. The MoCTCA report (2020, p. 23) noted that, "Occupancy rates decline by nearly half during the winter months." This effectively means that earnings decline substantially during the off-season. Due to these fluctuations, women's ability to rely on tourism as a steady source of income is limited, particularly in communities that lack other sources of income.

The Tharu settlements and Ghale Gaun are particularly endangered because the majority of their revenue comes from cultural events and basic hosting, both of which are highly dependent on the number of visitors. As a result, their income drops rapidly when visitor numbers decrease, thereby affecting their financial security and limiting their ability to save or plan. In contrast, Sirubari and Lwang Ghalel apply joint savings and reinvestment methods to mitigate seasonal fluctuations and stabilise sales throughout the year. These structures provide women with greater economic resilience while minimising the impacts of seasonality.

Similar findings can be seen at the Chepang Hill Trail, noted by Dhakal (2023, p. 63) that, "Spring and Autumn are the most favourable seasons for visiting the trail." This shows how seasonality influences rural tourism in Nepal and how communities with strong saving systems are well equipped to ensure women's financial stability during low-income months. These findings imply that seasonality affects empowerment when income is not supported by multiple sources of income or savings. Comparing the four communities, those with collective financial strategies become more resilient to seasonal downturns, enabling women to maintain empowerment paths and economic stability during the peak tourism season.

4.2.5 Linking to Kabeer's Framework: The Income to Empowerment

Kabeer's (1999) framework helps to clarify how the empowerment of the four communities correlates with income generation. Although income is an important factor in itself, women only became empowered when they can use their ability to make meaningful choices, which represents Kabeer's (1999) concept of agency.

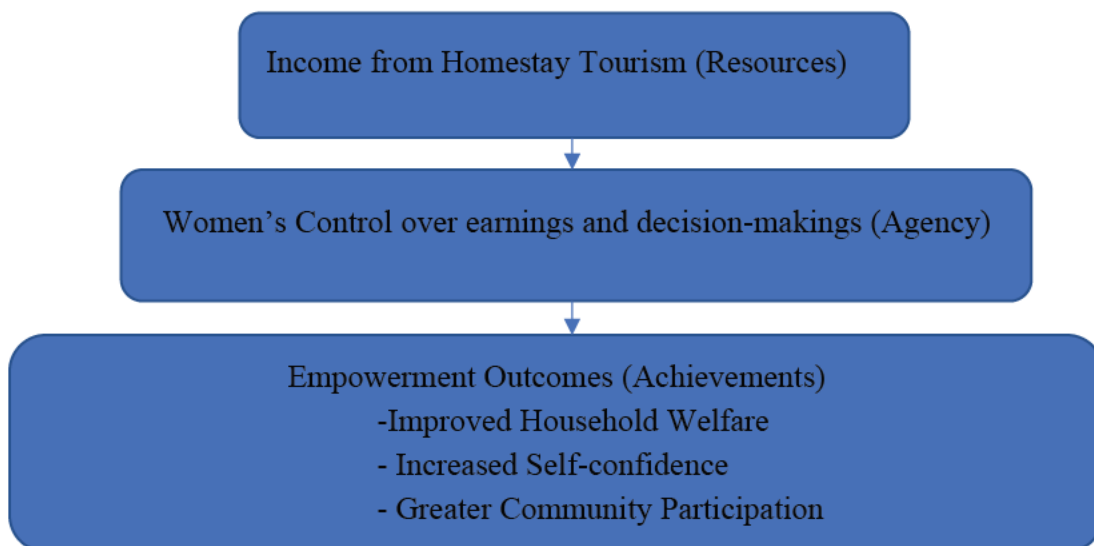
In Sirubari and Lwang Ghalel, women's engagement in financial decisions and cooperative savings indicates a clear progression from resources to agency. The ability of women to use their income for education and household expenses leads to visible benefits such as higher self-

confidence and improved welfare. One of the Sirubari women highlighted this connection, stating, “Our earnings from the homestay help pay school fees and daily food expenses” (Acharya & Halpenny, 2013, p. 376). These actions produce visible outcomes, including better household welfare, higher self-confidence, and deeper awareness of women’s roles in the community.

In contrast, the Tharu settlements and Ghale Gaun show a weaker change along Kabeer’s empowerment pathway. Although women have the potential to contribute to economic growth, their limited control and traditional decision-making impede these potential resources from becoming actual sources of empowerment. This means that women must be able to choose how their earnings are used, as income alone is not enough. Therefore, income often helps households’ please can you help me provide what report wants the fina survival without enhancing women’s autonomy. As a result, the change from potential resources to agency remains incomplete, and the empowerment outcome remains constrained.

Overall, the results show that empowerment rises when income is paired with decision-making power and decreases when male family members or community leaders maintain financial control. These findings reinforce the literature argument that empowerment is required beyond simply income generation (Deagon et al., 2021a; Kabeer, 1999; Sapkota, 2020). Empowerment is at its most effective where women are not merely earning money but also able to act as decision-makers and gain strength from cooperative and inclusive governance structures. If these enabling variables are absent, income generation produces insufficient empowerment outcomes.

Figure 6: Income Empowerment Pathway



Source. The Author's concept is based on Kabeer (1999).

Figure 6 illustrates that income from homestay tourism serves as an initial fund, but empowerment outcomes depend on whether this resource is transformed into agency and achievements. Cooperative governance and shared decision-making enhance women's access to income in Sirubari and Lwang Ghalel, empowering women to handle earnings and make community and family decisions. This transition from potential resource to agency results in greater understanding of women's roles, greater confidence, and stronger household welfare.

In contrast, women's capacity to make decisions is limited in Ghale Gaun and the Tharu settlements, because income remains seasonal and is governed by male-dominated groups. As a result, the route from resources to agency is weakened, and the outcomes of empowerment may be unstable or partial. This discussion highlights that homestay tourism supports empowerment when social and institutional structures enable women to actively transfer income into decision-making power with substantial outcomes.

4.2.6 Broader Economic Impacts

In addition to the household benefits, women's involvement in homestay tourism benefits wider community development. Women in Sirubari and Lwang Ghalel can support improvements such as community pathways and water systems through collective savings practices. According to MoCTCA (2020, p. 19), "Several women's groups in Sirubari now operate home-based enterprises that supply food items and souvenirs to tourists," showing how women's economic contribution also fosters local business. These effects illustrate that women's income supports the creation of local economic opportunities and strengthens community infrastructure.

Ghale Gaun demonstrates moderate progress as women gradually adopt new practices by observing the needs of travellers and adjusting their work as needed. Although these alterations suggest that women's economic skills are beginning to develop, they currently play a limited role in household income. In the Tharu settlements, as income from cultural performances is seasonal, it promotes cultural identity and raises awareness of heritage at the local level. This shows how women's roles in the tourism industry generate both cultural and economic value to the community.

Overall, the larger economic effects highlight that women's involvement in tourism impacts social and economic development, with the most significant effects appearing in communities that maintain tourism and a cooperative system.

4.2.7 Summary

This section highlighted the differences in homestay income across the four communities. Cooperative savings schemes and shared decision-making in Sirubari and Lwang Ghalel ensure cash flows are more predictable and enable women to influence how revenue is allocated. Thus, collective governance leads to better empowerment outcomes by improving women's financial stability and expanding their power over economic choices.

In contrast, women in Ghale Gaun continue to work with limited income and earnings in the Tharu settlements depend heavily on seasonal tourism. These conditions restrict women's ability to plan financially, demonstrating weaker pathways from income to empowerment in these communities.

4.3 Skills Development and Entrepreneurial Opportunities

Skill development indicates the agency component of Kabeer's (1999) empowerment framework, reflecting women's developing capacity to initiate, decide, and create new ideas within the tourism industry. Although access to formal training and advanced opportunities varied across communities, the outcomes suggest that homestay tourism has strengthened women's confidence, hospitality skills, and business awareness in Sirubari, Lwang Ghalel, Ghale Gaun, and the Tharu settlements.

4.3.1 Capacity Building Through Homestay Operations

Women have acquired valuable skills in preparing food, guest management, and sanitation practices, which they utilise in homestay tourism. Many Gurung women in Sirubari have participated in language and hospitality training classes offered by local committees. According to MoCTCA (2020, p. 20), "Women hosts in Sirubari have received basic hospitality and sanitation training organised through the village tourism committee," thus boosting their confidence and service quality when communicating with guests. Similarly, women in Lwang Ghalel have participated in training based on sustainable cooking techniques and waste management (Sapkota, 2020), indicating that training access can expand women's technical competence and readiness for

tourism work. This suggests that systematic training improves women's agency by enhancing their skills and self-assurance, encouraging them to confidently perform tourism roles.

Women in Ghale Gaun rely more on informal peer learning, observing neighbours' hosting and adjusting their roles accordingly. One participant explained, "We learn from observing visitors' expectations and other host mothers in neighbouring villages," (Sapkota, 2020, p. 61). This shows that, even without formal training, social media platforms serve as learning resources through which women gradually develop hospitality skills. However, women's ability to fully convert participation into leadership or entrepreneurial agency is constrained by a reliance on informal learning, which limits the depth and transferability of their skills.

These experiences demonstrate how homestay operations serve as an effective means of capacity building across communities, where women improve their confidence, enhance guest-handling skills, and build their capacity to participate meaningfully in tourism activities. Collectively, these findings imply that although homestay tourism enhances skill development across all four communities, formal and continuous instruction is crucial for transforming skills into persistent agency and expanding the women's empowerment outcomes.

4.3.2 Language, Leadership, and Entrepreneurial Skills

Women's involvement in homestay tourism has enabled them to develop beneficial communication skills, which contribute to their broader empowerment. Women have begun to take on roles such as financial facilitators and group coordinators in Sirubari and Lwang Ghalel. Palikhe (2018, p. 42) observes that "Women who managed homestays gradually developed leadership abilities by coordinating visitors' stays and managing group fund," showing how practical knowledge in homestay management directly builds organisational and decision-making skills. These skills enhance women's trust when dealing with guests and participating in collaborative tasks. This suggests that women's agency is boosted by the leadership and communication skills they acquire through homestays as they become more recognisable and effective with community structures.

Despite a lack of formal training opportunities, women in the Tharu settlements use traditional skills to manage performances and coordination of dance events. Pandit (2012, p. 46) states that, "Tharu women prepare customs, rehearse songs, and coordinate dance events, which teaches them

planning and teamwork.” This indicates that, despite differences from conventional tourism training, even culturally-rooted activities promote leadership development and entrepreneurial training. However, women’s ability to develop these skills into sustained entrepreneurial or decision-making power is hindered by a lack of leadership positions and personal control over income.

These emerging abilities (language use, teamwork, coordination, and financial management) show how homestay roles offer a platform for women to expand their confidence and leadership skills across the communities. Collectively, these findings indicate that while homestay tourism supports the development of leadership and communication skills, empowerment outcomes are most significant when these skills are recognised in economic decision-making and community governance structures, enabling women to exercise personal agency beyond supportive or cultural roles.

4.3.3 Entrepreneurial Capacities and Innovation

Homestay tourism has inspired women in these communities to start small businesses. Women in Sirubari create handicrafts, pickles, and herbal teas for tourists. MoCTCA (2020, p. 19) notes that, “Several women’s groups in Sirubari now operate home-based enterprises that supply food items and souvenirs to tourists.” This shows that women’s participation in tourism creates flexible income opportunities beyond simply serving as hosts. Likewise, in Lwang Ghalel, financial savings groups have evolved into informal lending groups that provide small loans for livestock and craft ventures (Sapkota, 2020). These initiatives illustrate the financial trust and willingness to reinvest in local companies. This suggests that women may transform skills and income into entrepreneurial agency if they have access to local economic networks and collective savings, therefore extending empowerment beyond hosting activities.

Ghale Gaun has observed a growing interest in entrepreneurship, however the women’s ability to expand their businesses is hindered by market barriers. Cultural performances and handicraft sales offer significant opportunities in the Tharu settlements but remain tied to seasonal events. As a result, women’s businesses in these fields generate substantial profits but lack year-round stability. This indicates that entrepreneurial activities remain unstable and limit women’s ability to achieve sustainable economic empowerment without consistent market access and institutional support.

Table 4.2: Training and Entrepreneurship Patterns Across Four Communities

Community	Training Areas	Skill Outcomes	Entrepreneurial Activities	Empowerment Impacts
Sirubari	Hospitality management, sanitation, and language training.	Improved service skills and confidence.	Food and souvenir production.	Greater self-reliance and leadership.
Lwang Ghalel	Sustainable cooking and savings-group training.	Teamwork and leadership development.	Livestock and craft ventures.	Increased agency in decisions.
Ghale Gaun	Informal peer learning.	Basic hosting and communication skills.	Handicrafts and local produce.	Growing confidence and participation.
Tharu Settlements	Cultural Performance Coordination.	Planning and teamwork.	Handicraft and dance events.	Cultural pride and visibility.

Source. Author’s analysis of MoCTCA (2020), Palikhe (2018), Pandit (2012), and Sapkota (2020).

Table 4.2 illustrates how entrepreneurial efforts and skill-building programmes vary across communities, with Sirubari and Lwang Ghalel exhibiting a more structured enterprise model and training, compared to the more recent but less organised strategies in Ghale Gaun and the Tharu communities.

Table 4.2 further demonstrates that communities with institutionally supported financial and training structures experience the highest entrepreneurial outcomes. Sirubari and Lwang Ghalel

show a clearer pathway from skill development to enterprise creation. In contrast, Ghale Gaun and the Tharu settlements depend on seasonal activities and informal learning, which restrict business growth and long-term financial stability. Collectively, the table highlights that entrepreneurship enhances women's empowerment when skill development is reinforced by financial access and a supportive governance structure.

4.3.4 Link to Empowerment Outcomes

Women's growing skills in management, hospitality, and craft production have translated into greater leadership positions within the communities. By enabling them to participate in group decisions and coach younger members, these abilities increase women's agency. One Lwang Ghalel participant said, "After joining the homestay, I can make decisions for our group and teach younger women what I learned," (Sapkota, 2020, p. 63). This indicates that skills obtained through homestay tourism do not remain solely technical competencies but also strengthen women's ability to make decisions and serve in leadership roles within social structures.

Combining the findings in sections 4.3.1 to 4.3.3, this suggests that skill development becomes empowering when it enables women to advance from participation to visible authority, mentorship, and recognised decision-making power, marking a distinct transition from agency to empowerment achievements.

4.3.5 Summary

Overall, this section suggests that skill development is not effective on its own but instead becomes transformative when it empowers women to exercise agency, take on leadership roles, and directly participate in community and economic decision-making. Comparing across the four communities, Sirubari and Lwang Ghalel show that empowerment outcomes are strongest when skills are reinforced through training networks, leadership participation, and business growth. In contrast, the Tharu settlements and Ghale Gaun indicate the weakest outcomes, with learning that is informal, seasonal, or culturally limited. This implies that, as evidence in Kabeer's framework, the development of skills acts as a critical enabling condition, linking women's participation in tourism to sustainable empowerment achievements only when in the context of formal and social support networks.

4.4 Financial Independence and Decision-making Power

Financial independence refers to an accomplished dimension in Kabeer's (1999) empowerment framework, representing women's capacity to control income, earnings, and decisions within the household or community. The analysis of Sirubari, Lwang Ghalel, Ghale Gaun, and Tharu settlements illustrates that due to variations in caste relations, leadership models, and cultural expectations, are linked to women's ability to influence financial decisions fluctuates significantly.

4.4.1 Household Autonomy and Control Over Earnings

Women in Sirubari can make their own choices regarding household expenditures, as they actively manage the homestay income. A participant noted, "Our earnings from the homestay help pay school fees and daily food expenses," showing direct control over family values (MoCTCA, 2020, p. 19). This shows that direct control over income gives women greater authority to make choices for family needs and enables their homes to meet immediate requirements. Similarly, women's bargaining power in family matters has grown in Lwang Ghalel because of participation in saving groups, indicating a gradual shift towards shared budgeting and greater influence over decisions such as children's healthcare and education. This suggests that women's agency is enhanced by household financial autonomy, enabling them to transform income into substantial management.

In contrast, Ghale Gaun women often consult male family members before making decisions. Male elders often choose to allocate their income to the household. This dynamic is more apparent in the Tharu settlements, where men control a great deal of tourism-related income. One Tharu woman explained, "The men handle the money: we mostly do the work," (Deagon et al., 2021, p. 7). These disparities indicate that women need to have control over how their income is used to feel empowered. These patterns indicate that women's economic participation does not necessarily result in empowerment when they lose control over household income, thereby reinforcing dependence rather than autonomy.

4.4.2 Participation in Community Financial Decisions

Women's involvement in financial decisions at the community level varies within the four communities and is vital to their empowerment. Women in Sirubari and Lwang Ghalel actively engage in discussions concerning group budgeting and joint savings groups. A village woman leader claimed, "We discuss how to spend the savings from each season and decide together," (Sapkota, 2020, p. 58), indicating that women exerted some influence over the allocation of community funds. Women have an active role in decisions affecting household welfare and

community development, therefore their role is an indicator of their growing agency. Although women began to contribute to savings activities, participation in Ghale Guan remains more limited, indicating an early yet emerging stage of shared decision-making.

In the Tharu settlements, women's agency is restricted, and patriarchal norms that limit women's influence over community resources are greater; as a consequence, the men continue to manage the financial structures, and the women rarely participate in group-level decisions. Overall, the level of involvement in financial decisions and the empowerment outcomes among communities varies: specifically, communities that allow women to influence financial decisions provide deeper empowerment pathways, while communities with more greater opportunities for agency and collective influence show weaker empowerment outcomes.

Overall, these findings indicate that women's empowerment in community financial decision-making depends not just on their contribution but also on their capacity to influence outcomes. This is most prevalent in Ghale Gaun and the Tharu settlements and least effective in Sirubari and Lwang Ghalel.

4.4.3 Savings, Loans, and Investment Decisions

A significant indicator of women's financial independence in Sirubari and Lwang Ghalel is their participation in savings and loan programmes. Women contribute a portion of their income to cooperative funds that provide microloans for small enterprises and livestock. One Sirubari woman explained, "We save a little each month to support others when needed," (Sapkota, 2020, p. 58), demonstrating that women not only generate income but also influence the allocation and utilisation of collective financial resources. This shows an expanding agency as women can use their own financial networks to invest in small businesses and household improvements.

In Ghale Gaun and the Tharu settlements, restricted access to cooperative schemes and formal financial institutions limits women's capacity to invest. This lack of access reinforces dependence on male-controlled income and limits women's ability to independently engage in financial activities. These variations highlight that financial autonomy depends not only on earning income but also on women's ability to access control and use financial mechanisms that support long-term empowerment.

Collectively, these findings suggest that women’s financial independence improves only when they have the power to decide how to save, borrow, and invest funds. This case appears to have occurred in Sirubari and Lwang Ghalel, but is largely absent in Ghale Gaun and the Tharu settlements.

4.4.4 Linking to Kabeer’s Empowerment Framework

Kabeer's (1999) dimensions of resources, agency, and achievements are closely linked to financial independence. The resources women need can be accessed through income and savings options, and their growing agency is evidenced by their participation in household and community financial decisions. Stronger earnings control and involvement in cooperative savings have led to major improvements in Sirubari and Lwang Ghalel, including greater household stability, confidence, and influence in decision-making.

Instead, Ghale Gaun and the Tharu settlements highlight how women’s ability to transform resources into agency declines when their financial roles are limited or handled by male family members. These disparities illustrate that women’s capacity to use financial resources to make decisions and influence outcomes in their households and communities is crucial to achieving empowerment.

Table 4.3: Women’s Financial Independence Across Four Communities

Community	Household Control	Community Role	Saving/Loan Access	Empowerment Level
Sirubari	Women manage income for family needs.	Participation in community meetings.	Regular savings and borrowing through cooperatives.	High.
Lwang Ghalel	Joint family budgeting.	Active role in local communities.	Strong cooperative funds.	High.
Ghale Gaun	Shared with male elders.	Limited participation.	Few savings option.	Moderate.

Tharu settlements	Men control most income.	Women rarely in committees.	Little or no access to loans.	Low.
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Source. Author’s analysis of Deagon et al., (2021), MoCTCA (2020), and Sapkota (2020).

Table 4.3 indicates that active savings and community participation have achieved greater financial independence in Sirubari and Lwang Ghalel. However, Ghale Gaun and the Tharu settlements continue to face limited access to economic opportunities and decision-making.

The table further illustrates that women’s financial independence is not determined by income generation alone but by the institutional and cooperative structures that foster income stability and collective decision-making. The variation between Sirubari, Lwang Ghalel, and the two other communities, highlights how shared governance and saving mechanisms help women to convert earnings into long-term financial security, while the lack of these frameworks limits sustainable empowerment.

4.4.5 Summary

This section illustrates that variations in income control, access to savings resources, and participation in household and community-level financial decisions do influence women’s economic independence and decision-making power across the four communities. Based on Deagon et al. (2021a), MoCTCA (2020), and Sapkota (2020), women in Sirubari and Lwang Ghalel experience greater empowerment outcomes from shared budgeting practices, cooperative saving systems, and greater involvement in financial decision-making, which enable them to turn income into meaningful agency.

In contrast, women in the Ghale Gaun and the Tharu settlements remain constrained by male-dominated financial control, restricted access to credit and savings, and limited participation in community governance, all of which hamper the transformation of income into sustainable empowerment. Interpreted through Kabeer’s empowerment framework, these patterns indicate that financial resources alone are insufficient; instead, the extent to which institutional structures and social arrangements allow resources to be utilised as agency and translated into long-term achievements determines women’s empowerment.

4.5 Structural Barriers to Empowerment

Despite progress in skill development, community engagement, and income generation, women's empowerment remains uneven amongst all four communities. Inadequate infrastructure, limited education, patriarchal norms, and caste hierarchies continue to affect who may participate in homestay tourism and benefit from it. These systemic barriers limit the extent to which tourism can lead to substantial empowerment for women and restrict their ability to exercise agency.

4.5.1 Gender Norms and Patriarchal Constraints

Gender norms continue to affect women's involvement in homestay tourism in all four communities, namely by framing their work as an extension of household tasks rather than advancement towards recognised economic roles. As stated by a woman in Lwang Ghalel, dealing with guests in addition to "Double Workload" household duties (Sapkota, 2020) shows how women's labour continues to be related to traditional caregiving expectations. This restricts the transformative potential of tourism involvement in Sirubari and Lwang Ghalel, because women's domestic duties remain unchanged even when they do earn income.

There is greater patriarchal control in the Tharu settlements, where men retain ownership of finances and external negotiations. The statement, "We dance for guests, but men decide what happens with the money" (Pandit, 2012, p. 45), is an explicit example of how visibility in the tourism sector is not equivalent to decision-making power. The argument is clear from these patterns. While tourism expands women's participation, gendered expectations and male-dominated financial control restrict this involvement from becoming effective empowerment.

These findings suggest that women's engagement in homestay tourism does not necessarily undermine traditional gender stereotypes, particularly when tourism labour is portrayed as an extension of domestic duties. The extent to which participation translates into empowerment is restricted by patriarchal control over income and decision-making, while women's role in hosting and cultural events has increased. This implies that tourism faces the risk of preserving rather than altering power structures without an accompanying shift in domestic gender relations and recognition of women's economic contributions.

4.5.2 Caste-based and Social Exclusion

Women's participation in homestay tourism remains limited by caste hierarchies, particularly Dalit women in Ghale Gaun, who remain mainly excluded from the decision-making process. One Dalit

woman explained, “We attend meetings, but the decisions are already made by others” (Sapkota, 2020, p. 263), illustrating that their participation is symbolic rather than meaningful. While Lwang Ghalel has provided some opportunities through cooperatives, not all communities have utilised these opportunities. The extent to which homestay tourism can empower all women equally is restricted by these patterns, which indicate that caste status still determines who can assume leadership roles and whose opinions influence community decisions.

The fact that caste-based exclusion continues to exist highlights that empowerment through tourism remains uneven and socially mediated. Through homestay tourism, which offers new opportunities for involvement, the transformative potential for Dalit women is constrained by symbolic inclusion without true decision-making authority. This confirms the argument that, particularly in situations where caste systems remain deeply rooted, empowerment depends upon the acquisition of power within community institutions and access to tourism opportunities.

4.5.3 Education and Skill Gaps

Education and skill gaps continue to restrict women’s empowerment across all four communities. In Ghale Gaun and Tharu settlements, the majority of women depend on observational instruction, whereas younger women in Sirubari who have completed hospitality training demonstrate a greater degree of independence, leadership, and willingness to step into public interaction (MoCTCA, 2020).

Women’s ability to negotiate with tourists, engage in marketing and promote their homestay through digital platforms is further hampered by limited literacy and language skills. Due to these skill gaps, even passionate women are unable to compete with the more established homestays or fully capitalise on tourism opportunities. Overall, women’s ability to transform participation into sustainable empowerment is hindered by unequal access to education and formal instruction, because they lack the necessary assets to make decisions, operate an enterprise, and improve their economic roles. This suggests that homestay tourism alone is insufficient to shift women from participation into sustained agency and leadership without specific training and educational support, therefore reinforcing structural inequalities in empowerment outcomes.

4.5.4 Infrastructure, Accessibility, and Market Barriers

Persistent market and infrastructure obstacles that limit the development of homestay tourism weaken women’s empowerment. Unsafe roads, unreliable transport, and insufficient sanitation in Ghale Gaun and the Tharu settlements discourage visitors, which directly affects women’s ability to earn a regular income or expand their businesses. Evidence from the Chepang Hill Trail, where “Tourism brings some negative changes in waste-management and sanitation management” (Dhakal, 2023, p. 67), shows how poor facilities affect both guests' experience and the trust of local businesses.

These limitations also affect women’s mobility, access to supplies, and market connections. It can be challenging to advertise homestays, manage bookings, or coordinate group sales when communication is weak. Women’s efforts are therefore remaining small, seasonal, and vulnerable to external shocks. These barriers show that without a supportive infrastructure that enables consistent access, mobility, and market participation, empowerment cannot advance, especially when women are skilled and motivated.

Table 4.4: Structural Barriers Across Communities

Community	Gender Norms	Caste Exclusion	Education and Skills	Infrastructure and Access
Sirubari	Women handle multiple roles; men still lead.	Partial inclusion.	Basic cooperative training.	Good roads; steady flow.
Lwang Ghalel	“Double Workload”	Dalit inclusion is improving.	Youth are gaining skills.	Moderate access; growing market.
Ghale Gaun	Traditional roles persist.	Dalit women excluded.	Low literacy.	Poor roads; weak facilities.
Tharu Settlements	Men control income.	High caste bias.	Few training options.	Seasonal access; poor sanitation.

Source. Author’s analysis of Dhakal (2023), MoCTCA (2020), Pandit (2012), and Sapkota (2020).

Table 4.4 highlights the differences in structural barriers across the four communities. Sirubari and Lwang Ghalel experience moderate empowerment supported by cooperatives and training, while Ghale Gaun and the Tharu settlements continue to struggle with patriarchal norms, caste exclusion and inadequate facilities. These disparities show that the outcomes of women's empowerment depend on broader social and structural change, as well as on women's active participation in tourism.

Table 4.4 further demonstrates infrastructure and market access function as enabling or constraining conditions for women's empowerment across the four communities. Ghale Gaun and the Tharu settlements continue to face structural challenges. At the same time, Sirubari and Lwang Ghalel have more reliable transport, sanitation, and market connectivity, allowing women to maintain tourism activities beyond peak seasons. Women's mobility, access to markets, training opportunities, and dependence on seasonal tourism are affected by these infrastructural defects, therefore making it more difficult to convert their contributions and skills into sustained economic agency. This suggests that tourism participation alone is insufficient to generate a persistent empowerment outcome for women without parallel investment in infrastructure and market systems.

4.5.5 Linking to Kabeer's Framework

According to Kabeer's (1999) empowerment model, women require access to resources, the agency to decision-making, and the ability to achieve significant outcomes. The findings from the four communities demonstrate an unequal distribution of these dimensions. Cooperative saving groups enhance women's resources in Sirubari and Lwang Ghalel, but gender norms that restrict decision-making power still limit the women's agency. Women in Ghale Gaun and the Tharu settlements are less able to convert tourism participation into genuine empowerment due to poor infrastructure, insufficient training, and low literacy.

Overall, adopting Kabeer's framework illustrates that although homestay tourism offers initial economic benefits, it also poses challenges. Opportunities, structural barriers such as caste exclusion, gender roles, education gaps, and insufficient facilities prevent women from fully accessing resources, exercising agency, and realising sustained empowerment outcomes.

4.5.6 Summary

Structural barriers continue to impact unequal empowerment outcomes across all four communities. Women's access to tourism opportunities and decision-making involvement is restricted by caste-based exclusion, gender norms, limited education, and insufficient infrastructure. In Ghale Gaun and the Tharu settlements, where poor mobility, low literacy, and deeply rooted social hierarchies hamper both confidence and income growth, these problems are most visible. In contrast, Sirubari and Lwang Ghalel have greater access to training and cooperative structures, which enable women to exercise greater agency within communities and households.

As evidenced by Kabeer's (1999) framework, these outcomes demonstrate that women's empowerment remains inadequate because structural constraints continue to restrict resources, limit agency, and undermine achievements. Many economic opportunities are generated by homestay tourism, but in addition to tourism participation, extensive social and infrastructure improvements are required for meaningful and sustainable empowerment.

4.6 Comparative Analysis Across Four Communities

In this section, women's empowerment outcomes across Sirubari, Lwang Ghalel, Ghale Gaun, and the Tharu settlements are compared. Caste, geography, and community structures are examined regarding how they impact resources, agency, and achievements through homestay tourism. The analysis shows both common development and context-specific variation in how women benefit from tourism.

4.6.1 Patterns of Empowerment and Economic Resources

Homestay tourism has contributed to economic engagement across all four communities, but the level of empowerment varied based on the income distribution and stability. In Sirubari, cooperative structures encourage women to operate small enterprises, such as food and souvenir production, as well as hosting. As the MoCTCA report (2020, p. 19) indicates, "Women's group now run home-based enterprises," therefore demonstrating how tourism earnings expand widely and support domestic and community resources.

Collective savings and livestock investments are both beneficial to women in Lwang Ghalel, because they provide financial security during the off-season. However, women in Ghale Gaun remain at an early stage of economic participation, and limited financial control suggests their

income cannot fund long-term empowerment. The primary sources of income for Tharu women are craft sales and cultural performances, but these fluctuate with tourist numbers and result in less reliable income. These differences between communities show that financial empowerment is strongest when income is reliable, shared, and reinvested, and weakest when earnings are seasonal or subject to external forces.

In comparison, these patterns suggest that the presence of institutional structures such as cooperatives, savings groups, and reinvestment opportunities that stabilise income and enable women to convert earnings into long-term resources defines economic empowerment rather than tourism participation alone. Previous research on community-based tourism emphasises the value of collective financial mechanisms for supporting women's empowerment beyond seasonal tourism cycles (Deagon et al., 2021a; Pasanchay & Schott, 2021; Sapkota, 2020), and these findings align with the outcomes of this study. This comparison shows that when tourism involvement is informal or externally controlled, the empowerment outcomes are strongest when income remains consistent, is cooperatively handled, and is embedded within a supportive government system.

4.6.2 Caste, Gender, and Decision-making Power

Women's agency patterns across the four communities highlight how gender norms and caste directly affect decision-making participation. A more inclusive governance culture is evident in Lwang Ghalel, where Gurung and Dalit women collaborate on planning and budgeting. Sapkota (2020, p. 63) notes that, "Dalit women are involved in planning and budgeting activities alongside Gurung members," indicating an effort beyond symbolic involvement and towards more equitable representation.

In contrast, Ghale Gaun's budgeting remains controlled by men, limiting women's influence even when they engage in tourism activities. Although women join in cooperative meetings and discuss financial priorities in Sirubari, important decisions are still made by larger, male-led community structures. Tharu women frequently attend meetings but are restricted from speaking or voting, showing how caste and patriarchal norms restrict their ability to convert participation into real agency. These similarities demonstrate that meaningful empowerment is possible when representation is reinforced by real decision-making power. It is insufficient to include women in

meetings; the agency requires institutionalised inclusion that enables women to impact results, not simply observe them.

These findings align with an increasing number of studies on gender and development, which argue that representation alone does not guarantee empowerment unless women recognise authority to make choices in institutions. Empowerment is strongest among the four communities where formalised decision-making rights accompany participation, compared to informal or observational involvement. Therefore, this comparative analysis emphasises that institutionalised inclusion, where women's opinions influence outcomes, does require meaningful empowerment, not merely women's presence at community gatherings.

4.6.3 Geographical Accessibility and Exposure

The extent to which women can benefit from homestay tourism is greatly determined by geography. Reliable transportation links and active tourism promotion help Sirubari and Lwang Ghalel offer women consistent access to training opportunities and regular contact with tourists. By contrast, Ghale Gaun's remote location restricts market access and visitor flow, limiting the exposure women need to build income, skills, and confidence. Despite having a flat landscape, the Tharu settlements experience poor infrastructure, poor facilities, and poor sanitation, all of which frustrate tourists and restrict women's participation.

Similarly, Dhakal (2023, p. 64) notes that "Insufficient sanitation and transport facilities hindered eco-tourism growth," demonstrating the significance of infrastructure and physical access for women to turn tourism participation into empowerment. Overall, geographically disadvantaged areas remain limited by irregular tourism and lower visibility, while communities with more substantial infrastructure experience more stable opportunities for skill development and income.

From a comparative perspective, geographical disadvantage emerges as a structural constraint that perpetuates caste and gender inequalities. There are fewer opportunities for women to develop skills, earn income, and achieve social recognition in communities with limited accessibility and low tourism demand. This analysis highlights that women's participation in tourism remains fragmented and risky due to a lack of proper infrastructures and market exposure, and consequently limits the extent to which tourism can serve as a sustainable path to empowerment.

4.6.4 Shared Achievements and Remaining Gaps

Homestay tourism has improved women’s self-confidence and public visibility among the four communities. This evolution is especially notable in Sirubari and Lwang Ghalel, where women now handle a portion of the community’s finances and manage guest relations, showing an apparent shift toward roles traditionally dominated by men. According to UNDP (2020, p. 28), “Community-based tourism has enabled rural women to assume roles once dominated by men,” a development that is clearly observed in these two communities.

However, the achievements are not evenly distributed. Due to a lack of institutional support, seasonal income, and insufficient training, women in Ghale Gaun and the Tharu settlements continue to face serious challenges. Dhakal (2023, p. 66) emphasises that, “Continuous training and financial access are essential for expanding rural tourism benefits, factors that remain inadequate in these two communities.” These disparities highlight that, as empowerment gains occurred in all contexts, progress remains uneven, with less developed communities still limited by structural barriers, skill gaps, and irregular tourism demand.

Overall, these findings indicate that homestay tourism improves women’s self-confidence and public visibility, sustained empowerment needs institutional support, continuous education, and regular job opportunities, all of which remain uneven across the four communities.

Table 4.5: Comparative Empowerment Levels Across Four Communities.

Community	Resources	Agency	Achievements	Overall level
Sirubari	Stable income and cooperatives.	Shared decision-making.	Strong leadership and confidence.	High.
Lwang Ghalel	Inclusive benefit-sharing.	Joint participation in communities.	Growing visibility.	Strengthening.
Ghale Gaun	Limited diversification.	Male-dominated decisions.	Emerging confidence.	Transitional.
Tharu settlements	Seasonal income.	Restricted voice.	Low recognition.	Constrained.

Source. Author's analysis of Dhakal (2023), MoCTCA (2020), Sapkota (2020), and UNDP (2020).

Table 4.5 illustrates how inclusive structures and stability in the tourism industry contribute to stronger empowerment outcomes by highlighting differences in social achievements, decision-making, and access to resources.

Table 4.5 also illustrates that structural constraints intersect across gender, caste, education, and infrastructure, and are influenced by unequal empowerment outcomes across the four communities. Communities such as Sirubari and Lwang Ghalel, with better institutional support, access to training, and physical infrastructure, are better positioned to turn tourism participation into agency and leadership; this aligns with a broader body of literature on empowerment. In contrast, in Ghale Gaun and the Tharu settlements the women's capacity to convert participation into sustainable empowerment remains hindered by persistent caste exclusion, low literacy and weak infrastructure.

4.6.5 Summary

These trends reinforce Kabeer's (1999) theory that empowerment relies on the interaction of resources, agency, and achievements. Women have the potential to transform tourism participation into meaningful empowerment in communities with cooperative systems, reliable infrastructure, and inclusive decision-making; those lacking these characteristics experience slower and uneven progress.

Overall, the comparative analysis indicates that the interaction of structural conditions, decision-making power, and economic resources do influence women's empowerment outcomes within the four communities. Significant achievements can be observed in Sirubari and Lwang Ghalel, when supported by consistent revenue, inclusive governance, and stable income flows, therefore empowering women to transform their involvement in tourism into lasting agency and tangible successes. In contrast, Ghale Gaun and the Tharu settlements continue to struggle with problems such as insufficient facilities, seasonal income, and persistent caste and gender norms, all of which limit women's opportunities and influence and ultimately limit the women's capacity to translate involvement into long-term empowerment. These results align with a broader body of literature on empowerment, which suggests that tourism alone is insufficient to achieve meaningful

empowerment; economic participation requires institutional inclusion, dependable infrastructure, and opportunities for women to exercise decision-making authority.

4.7 Chapter Conclusions

This chapter discusses how homestay tourism has empowered women in Sirubari, Lwang Ghalel, Ghale Gaun, and the Tharu settlements, using a framework of resources, agency, and achievements. The results demonstrate that homestay tourism has enhanced women's access to finances, decision-making opportunities, and income; however, the empowerment outcomes remain varied across communities.

Across the tables and comparative analysis, Sirubari and Lwang Ghalel demonstrate greater women's empowerment outcomes for the women through stable tourism income, cooperative structures, and a more inclusive decision-making process, thereby enabling women to transform participation into sustained agency and visible achievements. In contrast, in Ghale Gaun and the Tharu settlements, seasonal tourism, poor infrastructure, and deeply rooted caste and gender norms persist, limiting women's ability to convert tourism involvement into long-term empowerment.

Overall, the chapter illustrates that participation in tourism alone is insufficient to achieve women's empowerment. Based on the broader empowerment literature, economic participation is more meaningful and sustained when it is supported by institutional inclusion, skill development, and enabling structural conditions. This conclusion sets the foundation for the following chapter and a deeper synthesis and discussion of the implications.

5 Conclusion

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the key insights gained from a comparative analysis of homestay tourism and women's empowerment across four rural Nepali communities: Sirubari, Lwang Ghalel, Ghale Gaun, and the Tharu settlements. The conclusion derived from the findings highlights the complex, uneven, and context-specific nature of empowerment shaped by institutional, social, and structural challenges. By integrating the study's empirical patterns with Kabeer's (1999) empowerment framework, the findings clearly illustrate how and why homestay tourism both enables and constrains women's empowerment. This chapter addresses the research questions, presents theoretical contributions, includes a comparative table, discusses implications, outlines limitations, and suggests future research directions.

5.2 Research Questions Review

This study examined three interrelated research questions focused on income generation, skill development, and financial independence, with the aim of determining how homestay tourism contributes to women's empowerment in rural Nepal. Combining findings among the four communities of Sirubari, Lwang Ghalel, Ghale Gaun, and the Tharu settlements, the study demonstrates that women's empowerment through homestay tourism is influenced by institutional, social, and structural variables, rather than being uniform or an inevitable outcome. Notably, the research questions clearly highlight both the enabling and constraining features of homestay tourism, prompting this study to critically examine not only the positive effects of income, skills, and financial independence but also the structural obstacles and inequalities that contribute to women's empowerment outcomes across different rural contexts.

This study presents key results in response to the three research questions outlined in chapter one, by analysing secondary data across four rural Nepali homestay communities.

RQ1: *How does homestay tourism contribute to women's income generation and financial stability in Sirubari, Lwang Ghalel, Ghale Gaun, and the Tharu communities, and what challenges or inequalities affect these outcomes?*

The findings demonstrate that earning money is not the same as being independent. Each of the four communities generates revenue from homestay tourism; however, they vary significantly in the quality, stability, and control of that income. In Sirubari and Lwang Ghalel, income is considered a resource that can be transformed into agency, assisted by cooperative governance, saving structures, and regular tourist flows. In contrast, income in Ghale Gaun and the Tharu settlements remains seasonal, fragmented, and regularly mediated by male household members, therefore limiting its potential for empowerment.

This study contributes to existing knowledge on tourism empowerment by empirically showing that financial stability and collective governance, rather than income volume itself, are the primary mediators between income and empowerment. This reinforces Kabeer's "resources" dimension by demonstrating that resources must be institutionalised through cooperatives, saving groups, and inclusive governance.

RQ2: *What skills and business opportunities do rural women living in selected homestay communities in Nepal gain through homestay tourism, and what obstacles restrict these benefits?*

Among all four communities, homestay tourism operates as an informal platform, even where formal training is lacking. Through practice, observation, and peer learning, women gain skills in hospitality organisation, communication, and business development. However, the level of skill transformation varies. In Sirubari and Lwang Ghalel, women experience income as a resource that can be transformed into agency, supported by cooperative leadership, saving structures, and predictable tourist flows. These outcomes illustrate the "agency" feature of empowerment, which enables women to apply fresh opportunities (Kabeer, 1999). Conversely, skill development in Ghale Gaun and the Tharu settlements remains largely task-oriented and informal, often restricted to traditional or culturally assigned duties.

This study demonstrates that skills alone are not empowering unless they are linked to economic control and decision-making authority. This builds on empowerment theory, which describes skill development as an intermediate mechanism requiring supportive institutional settings to generate agency.

RQ3: *In what ways does homestay tourism influence women's financial independence and control over household resources in Nepal's rural homestay communities, including both enabling and constraining factors?*

The study highlights that the most crucial indicators of empowerment outcomes are women's financial independence and decision-making power. In Sirubari and Lwang Ghalel, women are showing improved pathways to empowerment. As shown in Kabeer's empowerment theory (1999), these situations enable women to progress fully along the empowerment path from resources to agency and achievements. However, women in Ghale Gaun and the Tharu settlements continue to face patriarchal norms and limited access to financial institutions, leading their empowerment process to remain either partial or stalled.

This study empirically confirms that empowerment is not an automatic outcome; instead, it is relational and negotiated. It enriches intersectional tourism research by highlighting how caste, gender norms and governance systems influence women's access to financial agency (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018).

Overall, the three research questions indicate that only when income, skills, and decision-making power are structurally connected can homestay tourism enhance women's empowerment. This study contributes distinctive, context-specific knowledge to gender and tourism scholarship by comparing four distinct community contexts. It emphasises that empowerment outcomes depend not just on women's participation in tourism but on how tourism is organised, governed, and socially embedded within rural communities.

5.3 Comparative Analysis of Empowerment Conditions Across Communities

To analyse the key conditions and issues shaping women's empowerment across the four communities, Table 5.1 presents a comparative overview of governance, cultural, and training-related factors.

Table 5.1: Synthesised Empowerment Conditions Across Four Communities.

Community	Governance Conditions	Gender and Caste Dynamics	Training Conditions	Issues Identified
Sirubari	Strong cooperatives and shared decision-making.	Equal gender roles.	Regular hospitality training.	Heavy workload and dependence on tourism continuity.
Lwang Ghalel	Inclusive benefit-sharing and Dalit inclusion.	Gender relations and improving caste.	Skills training and savings groups.	Inconsistent participation among new households.
Ghale Gaun	Weak coordination and Inadequate leadership.	Patriarchal household control.	Informal and practical learning.	Restricted authority and small earnings.
Tharu settlements	Informal and male-controlled structures.	Strong patriarchal norms.	Minimum official instruction.	Low financial control and seasonal income.

Note. Author's synthesis is based on thematic analysis and Kabeer's (1999) empowerment framework.

Table 5.1 shows that although homestay tourism provides economic opportunities for women, underlying gender norms, access to capacity building opportunities, and the inclusiveness of governance systems across four communities have a greater impact on empowerment outcomes. Women's financial authority and decision-making remain restricted in communities with informal or male-dominated structures, while communities with stronger cooperative governance and skills support fewer structural constraints. The table further highlights that underlying institutional and social conditions enhance empowerment, thereby explaining why similar tourism initiatives yield different outcomes across regions. When analysing women's empowerment through homestay

tourism, this comparative synthesis reinforces the importance of emphasising structural incentives and obstacles.

5.4 Implications

5.4.1 Theoretical Implications

This study makes a significant theoretical contribution to women's empowerment and tourism by advancing the understanding of empowerment in rural homestay tourism contexts. The findings are guided by Kabeer's (1999) empowerment framework, demonstrating that empowerment cannot be explained through participation or income generation alone; it must be understood as a conditional and structurally mediated process. While Kabeer describes empowerment as a combination of resources, agency, and achievements, this study strengthens the framework by providing empirical evidence that resources only become empowering when they are stable, collectively governed, and accompanied by women's decision-making power.

The comparative analysis of four rural communities further illustrates that women do not simply acquire agency as an outcome of travelling. However, institutional arrangements, including inclusive leadership practices, financial saving mechanisms, and cooperative governance structures, either promote or limit agency. These findings reinforce feminist critiques that emphasise the structural and relational nature of empowerment and challenge individualistic interpretations of empowerment that are often implicit in tourism development narratives (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018). This study, which conceptualises empowerment as a socially embedded process rather than a personal outcome, shows that women's agency is strongest where governance systems actively support women's authority over income and decisions.

Additionally, the study contributes to feminist tourism literature by highlighting the significance of intersectionality in affecting empowerment outcomes (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018). The findings suggest that, even within similar homestay tourism models, caste relations, gender norms, and geographic location have had a major effect on how women experience empowerment. This supports current arguments that empowerment must be understood as a context-specific rather than universal, particularly in socially stratified rural settings (Deagon et al., 2021).

Overall, this study advances empowerment theory by offering a context-sensitive application of Kabeer's (1999) framework in rural tourism. It provides a stronger theoretical basis for future

research to move beyond assessing participation or income, and instead focus on the structural conditions that promote or hinder women's empowerment, therefore resulting in a broader and more complex understanding of the empowerment process.

5.4.2 Practical Implications

The study's findings offer significant implications for community development programmes that aim to promote women's empowerment through homestay tourism. A key insight is that community-level tourism management, governance, and support are crucial to empowerment outcomes; participation alone is insufficient. More sustainable empowerment outcomes are found in communities with effective cooperative structures and inclusive decision-making processes, illustrating the importance of institutional design rather than the scale of tourism activity.

Sirubari and Lwang Ghalel illustrate how women may turn tourism participation into meaningful empowerment with collective governance structures and skill development. In these communities, women are involved not just in labour but also in financial decision-making and community leadership. However, challenges such as heavy workloads and unequal participation persist in these relatively successful contexts, highlighting the fact that empowerment remains a negotiated and evolving process. In contrast, Ghale Gaun and the Tharu settlements illustrate how inadequate institutional coordination, patriarchal norms, and limited access to training constrain empowerment opportunities. Despite their active involvement in homestay related activities, women's roles remain mostly supportive, with some restrictions on authority over decisions and earnings. These factors limit women's ability to transform tourism participation into sustained agency and financial independence.

Overall, the results confirm that the empowerment of women through homestay tourism is condition-dependent rather than universal. The strong empowerment outcomes occur when women hold decision-making power, skills are developed, and governance is inclusive. This highlights the value of tackling underlying, deeper problems rather than participation alone.

5.5 Limitations

This research is based on qualitative analysis of secondary data from academic papers, government documents, and institutional records. While this technique limits direct engagement with women's lived experiences through primary research, it offers significant analytical strengths. The study

integrates multiple empirical findings within a coherent theoretical framework by utilising secondary qualitative data to enable systematic comparison across different rural contexts. Therefore, the research achieves a sophisticated understanding of women's empowerment through homestay tourism across social and geographic contexts, thanks to its strong conceptual depth and comparative breadth.

Furthermore, the study focuses on the four different communities of Sirubari, Lwang Ghalel, Ghale Gaun, and the Tharu settlements, rather than reflecting on all homestay areas in Nepal. Since local institutional arrangements, caste relations, and gender norms shape empowerment, this important scope ensures contextual accuracy and avoids exaggeration. A text-sensitive approach aligns with feminist and social constructivist scholarship, which acknowledges that empowerment processes are experienced differently in the various communities and places value on situated knowledge. By offering in-depth contextual insights, this study reinforces the credibility and practical importance of its findings, while emphasising that these findings cannot be overgeneralised within the studied communities. The study expands the reliability and practicality of its outcomes within the specific contexts examined by offering depth of understanding before overgeneralisation.

5.6 Overall Conclusions and Future Research

Ultimately, this study illustrates that women's empowerment through homestay tourism in rural Nepal cannot be an absolute outcome of participation, but instead a context-dependent and structurally mediated process. By exploring distinct community contexts, the study shows that empowerment arises from institutional, social, and governance factors that shape how participation is experienced and translated into major outcomes, rather than solely from women's involvement in tourism activities. This study further indicates that, depending on local governance, gender norms, and institutional arrangements, homestay tourism may also generate opportunities for women and reinforce structural inequalities. This then explicitly addresses both the enabling and constraining factors outlined in the research questions.

Among all four communities, homestay tourism provides women with opportunities to earn money, develop skills, and increase their visibility in society. Women are better able to exercise control over their income, participate in leadership roles, and gain recognition in their communities where cooperative governance, inclusive decision-making, and skills support are in place. In contrast, women's participation remains limited to supportive roles in contexts characterised by

informal structures, patriarchal norms, or seasonal tourism. These constraints therefore restrict their ability transform involvement into long-term empowerment. These disparities confirm that the factors related to tourism have had a greater impact on empowerment than tourism itself.

The study promotes feminist and intersectional perspectives that view empowerment as a relational and negotiated process, thereby strengthening gender and tourism scholarship. It raises uncertainty about generalised views of tourism as inherently empowering and highlights the need to examine how social norms, governance systems, and decision-making access interact to produce different outcomes for women across similar tourism settings.

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6 Appendix A: Secondary Data Sources Analysed

Category	Type of Source	Sources Used	Objective of Study
Academic Literature	Peer-reviewed journal articles.	Study on Homestay tourism, travel, and women's empowerment in South Asia (Acharya & Halpenny, 2013; Kanel et al., 2024; Sapkota, 2020).	To analyse theoretical viewpoints empirical findings on tourism and empowerment.
Government Reports	Official reports and policies.	Ministry of Culture, Tourism, and Civil Aviation (MOCTCA), Homestay Guidelines (2010), Nepal Tourism Reports.	To understand institutional settings and guidelines.
International Organization Reports	Global and regional reports.	UNWTO (2019), UNDP (2020).	To provide comparative data on women's empowerment and engagement in tourism.
NGO and INGO Reports	Development reports.	Reports from NGOs associated with tourism and rural development in Nepal.	To explore programming impacts and community-level insights.
Case study	Community-specific studies.	Freely published research on Sirubari, Lwang Ghalel, Ghale Gaun, and Tharu communities.	To enable comparative analysis across specific communities.
Supporting Literature	Books and secondary sources.	Literature on tourism, gender, and development.	To support theoretical and conceptual framework.