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Breaking Trails: Women's Struggles and Strengths in the Trekking Sector of Nepal



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Abstract

Himalayan region are the major destinations for both tourists and trekkers in Nepal. Over the time, trekking tourism has become a vital contributor to Nepal's economy, offering employment and income opportunities, particularly in mountain regions. This thesis examines the distinct difficulties and challenges faced by female guides in the field of trekking and tourism, paying special attention to gender-specific problems and the tactics of empowerment. Although the amendment changes in rules and the increasing participation in adventure tourism as a female guide, female guides of Nepal still face several challenges, such as harassment, ingrained gender norms, work-life imbalance, menstrual hygiene concerns, and the physical demands of the job. These difficulties impact their general well-being, work life and sense of security at work in addition to impeding their professional growth.

Using qualitative research methods as semi structured interviews with female trekking guides combined with analysis of existing literature reviews, this study thoroughly identifies and examines these problems. Women's authority and participations as guides is frequently undermined by gender norms, and many find it challenging to manage their personal and professional obligations due to long excursions and erratic schedules. Physical and verbal abuse as harassment is still a major problem, especially in isolated trekking settings. Further obstacles to female involvement and advancement are the physical demands of hiking and the lack of access to menstrual hygiene services.

Additionally, our study also emphasizes how important empowerment is in changing the experiences of female guides. Building confidence, improving skills, and fostering economic independence have all been demonstrated to be significantly impacted by training programs, awareness campaigns, and capacity-building activities. In addition to empowering women to overcome economic, emotional, and professional obstacles, these initiatives help dispel social norms and promote gender parity in the trekking and tourist industry in Nepal. This thesis highlights the necessity of systemic changes, social participation and supportive regulations that guarantee safety, dignity, and equal opportunity by highlighting the hardships and tenacity of female trekking guides. The results support a more sustainable and inclusive future for women working in adventure travel and add to larger conversations about gender and labor in the tourist industry.

Key words: Female trekking guides, tourism industry, gender, training, and empowerment

Chapter 1

Research Background

Trekking draws thousands of visitors to Nepal each year, thanks to the country's unique landscapes and rich cultural traditions. While tourism has opened up a range of employment opportunities for women, those working as trekking guides remain few and have received limited attention in both research and practice. While scholarly research has focused on different subgroups of women in tourism, female tour guides, especially those working in trekking, are often overlooked in the discourse.

The profession of female trekking guides is often perceived as a positive phenomenon that establishes transformation, opportunities, and empowerment in Nepal through tourism (Hillman, 2020). Female guides not only serve as professionals in a physically demanding and socially constrained environment but also function as symbols of gender progress in traditionally male-dominated spaces. However, even though women's contributions to the development of the tourism industry are becoming more widely acknowledged, they still face many obstacles because of institutional challenges, gender-based expectations, and societal conventions that restrict their ability to advance professionally and personally.

Most of the existing literature focuses on women's responsibilities and contributions to the tourism industry, emphasizing their value in community involvement, cultural exchange, and customer service. However, little is known about the issues female guides face, how they deal with those problems, and how they overcome the gendered and cultural barriers they face. Beyond recognizing their responsibilities, people must learn more about these women's lived experiences and how they overcome gender discrimination, develop resilience, and establish new places of empowerment.

Therefore, this study seeks to close this gap by focusing specifically on the challenges (Gender issues, work-life imbalance, hygiene issues, and physical risk) female trekking guides face in Nepal. To emphasize the challenges these females face in the actual world, it considers a gender viewpoint and other intersecting differences that have caused it. This study also looks at how feeling empowered shapes the everyday work experiences of female trekking guides and how that,

in turn, might support broader changes in society. By focusing on these areas, the research draws attention to ongoing gender challenges in tourism and shares down-to-earth ideas on how women can be better supported in taking on leadership roles.

1.1 Statement of problem

Nepal and the Himalayan region are the major destinations for both tourists and trekkers. Every year, hundreds and thousands of tourists from all over the world come to Nepal to trek its mountainous regions (Hillman, 2019). Thus, numerous trekking and tour agencies or companies have established and grown as a response to this relatively high-income earner within Nepal (Hillman & Radel, 2021). However, most trekking agencies and tour companies are run by men who, in turn, recruit and hire men as guides (Upadhaya, 2011). Still, the field of involving women in the trekking and tourism sector is limited and very restricted from a gender position despite the amendments and rules that have started to change in Nepal (Ewn Admin, 2019). It may be due to the myth that females cannot survive in the tourism industry (Hillman, 2019). Also, deeply entrenched traditional patriarchal values and gender-based social expectations make it difficult for Nepali women, particularly in remote and rural locations, to enter and succeed in the tourism arena (Hillman & Radel, 2021). In some cases, it is perceived by tour operators that the nature of the tourism jobs is more challenging (both physically and mentally), perhaps for women (Deagon et al., 2021). So, they deny employment opportunities to women (Hillman, 2019). In addition, women leaving their households and villages for employment is viewed negatively by males and their families in Nepali society. Females are expected to conduct household chores and be given less decision-making power in the family (Hillman & Radel, 2022). According to Shivakoti (2022), in tourism, women are often excluded from having access to mentoring opportunities, and they suffer from sexual harassment, exploitation, stereotyping, as well as promotion and salary discrimination. Similarly, segregated of women's work in tourism is overrepresented at the lower level, and they still have significantly fewer opportunities to reach management positions (Duffy *et al.*, 2015).

Women's participation in tourist activities not only helps the local economy but also promotes social change that gives them a voice in shaping their unique identities. However, the capacity of Nepali females to be employed in the tourism sector is very challenging, mainly due to gender issues, dual responsibility, lack of education, awareness, and so on (KC, 2013). The nominal results and viewpoints from researchers such as Hillman (2019), Upadhaya (2011), and Pandey &

Luitel (2022) indicate that women's status has been gradually upgraded by exposure to jobs but that they fail to address issues that women face like dual roles and challenges like gender discrimination, harassment that they face in tourism. Theories of gender inequality reveal that women's standing in most conditions is different from men's owing to their treatment as unequal and underprivileged (Cater, 1998). This is also a reality very often seen and felt in Nepal. Women's engagement in both domestic and professional roles undermines their participation in leadership and decision-making processes (Khatri, 2022). One of the main reasons for the limited involvement of indigenous women in Nepal's tourism industry is the absence of effective gender-related government policies and their inadequate implementation (Khatri, 2022).

The aim of this study and research question

The aim of this thesis is to ascertain the situations under which female trekking guides operate in Nepal and to know how they are empowering as a female to other females working in the same trekking field. The potential and contributions of female trekking guides in Nepal have been largely overlooked, both in academic research and in practical settings, for an extended period. Also, women guides have been treated with gender biases and given little consideration by tour operators, trekking agencies, colleagues (male guides), and tourists within the tourism industry in Nepal (Alrawadieh et al., 2021). Information related to the working environments of women in this industry remains minimal and under-researched (KC, 2013). Other studies specifically target tour and trekking guides' ways of guiding tours and how they interpret nature and historical sites for tourists (Tristani *et al.*, 2022). This study goes beyond those and investigates the conditions of the female individuals involved in an important growth industry in Nepal. Thus, this type of research is important to the female group in the tourism sector to empower them in society, enhance their participation in tour fields, and fight against issues like gender bias.

Research Questions

- 1. What are the issues women are facing in trekking as a female guide?***
- 2. What role does empowerment play to female guides?***
- 3. How is their work changing in the face of trekking and tourism?***

1.2 Nepal in Context

Nepal is a small landlocked country in South Asia, situated between China and India. It is globally renowned for its striking natural landscapes, particularly the Himalayas, which contain eight of the world's ten highest mountains, including the highest Mount Everest, the tallest peak on earth (Datta, 2017). Covering 147,516 square kilometers, Nepal is made up of three distinct geographic regions: the Himalayas, the Hills, and the Terai plains (Nepal Tourism Board, 2020). This varied landscape has played a significant role in attracting nature-loving tourists from around the world. The country's Himalayan landscape has made it especially attractive for trekking tourism, drawing thousands of international visitors each year. Popular trekking routes, such as the Everest Base Camp, Annapurna Circuit, and Langtang Valley, offer tourists not only scenic mountain views but also cultural immersion in rural villages. Trekking in Nepal provides a blend of physical adventure and rich cultural experience, making the country one of the top trekking destinations in the world (GlobalEdge, 2019). Adventure tourists engage in a variety of activities, including trekking, hiking, camping, and exploring protected natural areas (Rana, 2013).

1.3 Trekking Tourism in Nepal and the roles of guides

Trekking tourism in Nepal began to grow after 1951, following the country's political transformation into a democracy and the opening of its borders to foreigners (Rana, 2013). In 1953, Tenzin Norgay and Sir Edmund Hillary made history by successfully climbing to the top of Mount Everest. This historic climb brought global attention to Nepal's mountainous terrain and sparked international interest in trekking and mountaineering tourism (Rana, 2013).

In 1958, the government of Nepal initiated its formal involvement in tourism development through the establishment of the National Planning Council on Tourism and the National Tourism Development Board (Thapa, 2003). The launch of Nepal's first domestic airline in the same year further facilitated access to remote trekking regions. While only a small portion of tourists were involved in trekking in the early 1970s, by the year 2000, over 20% of international tourists came specifically to trek (Shrestha & Shrestha, 2012).

In the past, trekking was simply a way of life for many communities in Nepal, especially in areas where roads did not exist, and walking was the only means of transport. Over time, what was once a daily necessity gradually turned into a popular activity for international visitors seeking

adventure. Even today, with some improvements in infrastructure, many trails still require people to travel by foot, which adds to the genuine and immersive nature of trekking in Nepal (McHugh, 2018). National campaigns such as "Visit Nepal Year 1998" further enhanced the country's reputation and encouraged investment in trekking infrastructure, guide training, and hospitality services. Over time, trekking tourism has become a vital contributor to Nepal's economy, offering employment and income opportunities, particularly in mountain regions.

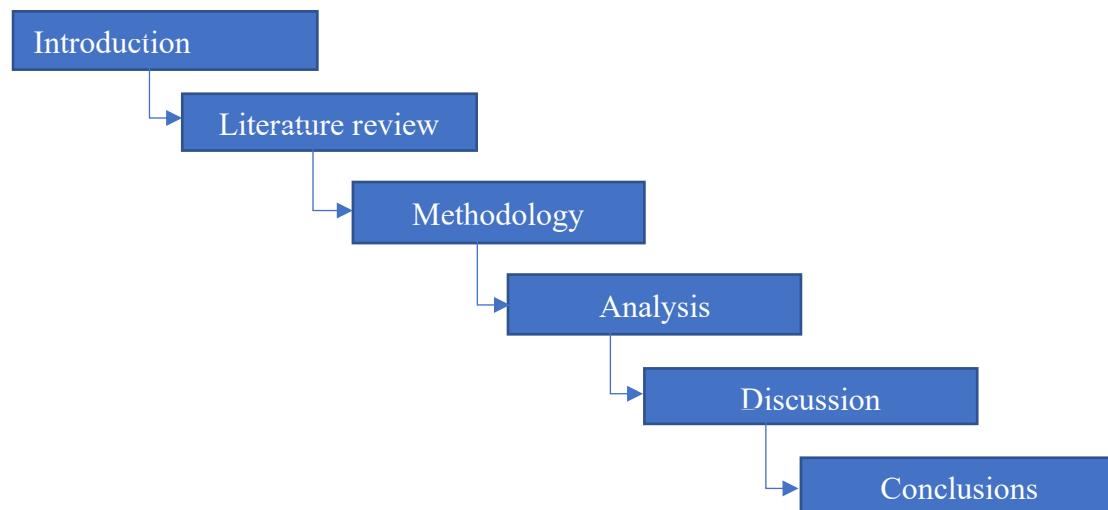
Since the 1970's a steady stream of tourists has arrived seeking a world-class trekking experience in the fabled Himalayas. Foreign tourists have typically relied on male porters and guides to organize and lead their trekking expeditions in Nepal. However, in the early 1990's, the first Nepali female guides began to appear (Grossman-Thompson ,2015). Tour guides are the essential interface between the host destination and its visitors. In fact, they are front-line employees who are very much responsible for the overall impression and satisfaction with the tour services offered by a destination. For example, Ap & Wong, (2001) found that the performance of the tour guide was an important attribute to the success of the tour. Through their knowledge and interpretation of a destination's attractions and culture, and their communication and service skills, they have the ability to transform the tourists' visit from a tour into an experience (Poudel et al., 2013. p 46). The role and duties may not be that glamorous as the profession, in many countries, lacks a well-defined career path and their incomes are reliant on a variety of income sources (Cetin & Yarcen, 2017). However, during the tourist season, female guides lead trips as short as one day and as long as 40 days for foreign tourists. These expeditions involve trekking from one lodge or campsite to the next while facilitating the safe journey of their client (Poudel et al., 2013). Normally the female guides earn a wage comparable to male guides (estimated USD 30 to 50 per day that includes food, accommodation, transportation, equipment) and importantly have the embodied competencies associated with guiding such as wearing hiking boots and other technical gear such as hiking pants, down jackets, and sunglasses (Grossman-Thompson ,2015).

1.4 Limitations of the study

Despite the effort of the author, this study does contain some limitation. The research is started with the aim to determine the effect of gender role in the field of female trekking field. Due to the limited time constrain of the master thesis program, only trekking part in the tourism sector from

female guide perspective has been studied. Additionally, similar type of data response from participants, the sample size is relatively small. These limitations are acknowledged and will be considered in the interpretation of results. This research Primarily captures participants' experiences at a single point in time and does not explore how empowerment or challenges may evolve. For example, shifts in the trekking industry due to COVID-19 or policy changes were not tracked. Findings are grounded in Nepal's unique socio-cultural environment; the findings may not be transferable to trekking guides or tourism contexts in other countries or regions. Additionally, three out of five interviews were conducted in Nepali and certain cultural expressions or emotional nuances used by participants, like FTG-02, FTG -01, FTG 04 may have been difficult to fully convey in English, potentially limiting the depth of interpretation.

1.5 Thesis structure guide



Source: self-made

This thesis consists of six main chapters. Each chapter has its importance and contribution to the research aim.

Introduction: This chapter provides the general background of the thesis, short introduction of trekking in Nepalese context with the problem statement and research aim, followed by the research question and sub-research questions.

Literature Review: Starting with the research introduction and research aim, this thesis will proceed toward the literature review presenting the challenges that female guides in trekking

tourism face, primarily focuses on gender roles, harassment, work life imbalance and health issues. Additionally, the chapter explores the concepts of empowerment and capacity building through the lens of empowerment theory.

Methodology: This section presents the overview of methodology and methods applied to this thesis throughout this research.

Analysis: This chapter presents the findings derived from the interviews, analyzing them in connection with the themes identified in the literature review. The analysis highlights how the participants' lived experiences address the research questions.

Discussion: Building on the previous chapter, this section interprets the findings in greater depth, connecting them to broader theoretical and contextual frameworks. It addresses both the main and sub-research questions.

Conclusion: This chapter will conclude the thesis with the sum up of all the chapters and with a genuine recommendation by the author according to the findings and suggests areas for future research to improve the conditions and opportunities for female trekking guides in Nepal.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Trekking and adventure tourism have grown significantly in recent years, with an increasing number of women joining the industry as professional guides (Arpacioğlu et al., 2023). Female trekking guides play a crucial role in the sector, mainly contributing to gender inclusivity and community development through empowerment (Grossman-Thompson, 2015). Thus, this chapter discusses the relevant literature as depicted by the previous researchers in order to give a good insight into the topic chosen for this study. Mainly, this chapter mentions the concept of Female guides in tourism, Gender roles, and issues faced by female guides like gender and harassment issues, work-life unbalance, hygiene issues, and other barriers. Similarly, this chapter also presents the concept of empowerment to see how empowerment plays a role in transforming a female, as well as the role of training and learning in this field.

2.1 Female tour and trekking guide

Ang (1990) defined a female tour guide as a person, usually described as a female professional, who guides groups of people and sometimes a single individual around places of client's interest, such as natural places, historical monuments, sites, and landscapes. Trekking guides are those individuals who interpret the culture, environment, flora and fauna, mountains, religion, and social norms to their customers in an inspiring and entertaining manner (Arpacioğlu et al., 2023). According to Grossman-Thompson (2015), tour guides are among the key frontline players in the trekking and tourism industry. Ap & Wong (2001) further added that guides have the ability and power to transform the tourists' visit from a tour into a memorable experience through their own knowledge and interpretation of a destination's attractions and culture with their communication as well as service skills. However, Prakash et al. (2011, p.66) argued that tour guides are "buffers" between tourists and insufficient infrastructure in the tourism industry. A previous study by Cole (2018) added that the role and duties of guides are not as glamorous as the profession in many developing countries (Nepal, Thailand, India, Peru) lacks a well-defined career path, and their incomes rely on various income sources. Guides must deal with multiple stakeholders at the same time. Employers, visitors, and host communities expect tour guides to have conflicting desires (Grossman-Thompson, 2015). On the one hand, tourists need safe and healthy travels with valuable experiences, and on the other hand, travel agencies provide guides to

provide high-quality services to tourists (Lin et al., 2020). They should also accept responsibilities of the whole tour, such as itinerary and group management, to ensure customer satisfaction and the profit margin (Weiler & Ham, 2002).

In our study, female guides are trekking guides who usually trek to nature and go on adventures. Tourist guides can be classified by their employment status as full-time or freelance tourist guides. Full-time guides can be either employed or self-employed (Lin et al., 2020). Specifically, full-time guides may be contracted by travel agencies or tour operators, or they may work independently as freelancers in various tourist destinations and attractions or be hired directly by whoever requires their services (Wang & Xu, 2018). According to Mwangi (2021), many females become guides for various reasons, such as to make money, pursue a relatively independent and highly dynamic work environment, learn about a new culture, and practice a foreign language. However, in their occupational roles, the feminine gender identity of female tour guides, harassment, gender roles, and gender stereotypes create obstacles for females in the field of tour guides (Jayaweera, 2024). Despite men and women guides having the same job responsibilities, females are viewed differently. They must negotiate gender relations that make it more challenging for them to remain employed in the tourism and leisure sectors (Cole, 2018). In Indonesia, for instance, male guides are constructed as being more able to engage in sexual relationships with clients and do not have to worry about morality and other issues. In contrast, women working as female guides are constructed as "sexualized and deviant others" (Wang & Xu, 2018, p.527). Here, men are constructed as the norm to which women are compared and consequently perceived as deviating. Between men and women working in tourism and the western backpackers on which tourism workers depend in order to sustain their livelihoods, relations of class, gender, and colonial stereotypes come into play (Sörensson, 2012).

Hillman (2019) presents the views of Nepal as female guides go to great lengths to assert the respectability of their profession. Top male guides, like those who lead climbs on Mt. Everest, are respected and admired as strong and brave representatives of Nepal. However, the Nepali state has often portrayed female trekkers as symbols of a backward and less-developed Nepal. Female trekkers do exist but still share the lower status of their male co-workers. In the meantime, Grossman-Thompson (2015) argues that, through service jobs like guiding, female workers

acquire more economic independence, dignity, rights and power in their families and communities, and higher social status. However, women's embodiment in service jobs like trekking has not received enough attention from past researchers. Tour guide is seen as an unacceptable job for women, especially in a conservative community. As a result, women suffer cultural hostility in the tourism sector (Cole, 2018). Male colleagues believe that women are unsuitable for tour guides due to the nature of the work, which conflicts with the traditional role of the mother (Hillman, 2019). To survive in public spaces successfully, female tour guides take advantage of gender strategies, including wearing close-fitting clothes to emphasize femininity, building supportive social networks with entrepreneurs around them, observing rules of silence among peers, and mediating with city inspection (Wang & Xu, 2018). While interacting with tourists, female tour guides can use 'affiliative humor' and 'self-enhancing humor' to create a congenial group atmosphere and group consensus, thereby enhancing interpersonal relationships (Alrawadieh & Alrawadieh, 2020). In their career, female tour guides are subjected to both gender-based discrimination and workplace sexual harassment; the latter has a negative impact on their job satisfaction and psychological well-being (Jayaweera, 2024). In addition, the 'mother figure' perception and the psychological burden of client safety could hinder women adventure guides' well-being (Jayaweera, 2024).

Other literature by Das (2018) and Mwangi (2021) Presents women's opportunities in the field of guiding. Women's involvement in the field of tour and trekking fosters women's empowerment, providing financial independence, skills like leadership and languages, and the ability to challenge norms of society, such as gender stereotypes in development (Grossman-Thompson, 2015). Economically, they can contribute to the local community of the country by attracting more female travelers from around the world who prefer women guides for safety and cultural comfort, which helps expand the market (Ramya & Deepak, 2024). Furthermore, gender diversity in adventure tourism promotes sustainable and responsible tourism, as many women-led trekking companies emphasize environmental conservation, cultural respect, and community involvement (Çiçek et al., 2017). Hillman (2019) presents the case study of Women Empowerment Treks and three sisters' adventure trekking of Nepal as they have trained and employed hundreds and thousands of female guides, significantly enhancing gender representation in the tour and trekking field. Similarly, Ladakhi Women's Travel Company from India is another example. It works as a

pioneering women-run trekking agency that offers female-led expeditions, ensuring safe and inclusive trekking experiences for the world (Das, 2018). In Africa, female safari guides in Tanzania have been breaking the barriers of gender in wildlife and other forms of adventure tourism, proving that women can excel in traditionally male-dominated professions (Mwangi, 2021).

Different groups of women in tourism all have concerns, whereas women tour guides are one of the least researched. Considering women guides will likely remain a long-term, effective supplement to improve the welfare and reduce gender inequality in tourism. Thus, it is necessary to study the group of female guides, which incorporates a gender perspective and the challenges they face. Additionally, the existing literature on female tour guides focuses mainly on the roles of females and their importance in tourism. However, it lacks how those females fight the situation created by society's norms and gender. Therefore, this paper utilizes gender with other barriers that can raise awareness about female career challenges, and at the same time, females can gain knowledge about how to be empowered and tackle the issues.

2.2 Role of gender in trekking and tourism

Gender roles can be conceptualized as fluid processes rooted within a historical context, which inform and sustain the normative, hierarchical subordination that shapes people's life chances (Sossaman, 2024). Gender roles in the trekking field have been regarded as a bastion of masculinity and have historically been shaped by gendered expectations that relegated women to peripheral roles. Early studies, such as those by Conte (1994), characterized tour and trekking as an extension of male dominance, where the presence of women was either marginalized or sexualized. In trekking specifically, Hillman (2019 and 2021) found that deeply entrenched social and cultural norms in developing countries like Nepal systematically restricted women's access to tourism professional roles (e.g., guides), reinforcing the notion that physical endurance and leadership in remote terrains were male domains. However, until today, there is much evidence that women's take-up of the tour guide occupation is positively taken by society, and social appreciation itself has become a motivating factor in serving in the tour guiding field (Kabil et al., 2022). For instance, in Jordan, there is a vast and growing demand for female guides, which drives travel companies. This trend has encouraged more Jordan women and society to pursue their careers as female guides

(Cole, 2018). Women prefer this trekking field, which renders them capable of providing a sound basis within the context of the tourism and trekking sector, leading to the need to support women who wish to become or who already are (Dileep, 1970). However, Cole (2018, p.7) argued that even when women enter the tourism field, their labor is still devalued, invisible, and subjected to heightened scrutiny compared to their male counterparts, as gender is a societal construct that reflects females as "soft, gentle, passive, emotional, dependent, and maternal." In contrast, males reflect "strong competitiveness, assertiveness, and confidence" (Jesús Carrasco-Santos et al., 2024, p.103). The cultures within which society and the people live value and reinforce masculinity, yet they devalue and undermine femininity (Sassaman, 2024). There is a lack of research on female leading trekking topics in terms of gender in the Nepalese context, and gender divisions are most apparent in tourism employment. Ordinarily, the trekking field has strong associations with manliness, and its masculinity is reflected in mountaineers' personal narratives, media representations, and people's trekking experiences (Cole, 2018).

According to Jayaweera (2024), the broader socialization processes have formed the gender roles expected of women in certain societies. Accordingly, women are supposed to be the prime responsibility of the domestic sphere, including caring for their children in the family in certain societies. Socially constructed gender roles have hindered the social and economic opportunities for women in the tourism industry. In society, females are supposed to play various social roles in two main spheres to the socially constructed gender roles: work and family. When performing social roles, one's gender identity and gender stereotypes are considered the two most influential social factors (Jayaweera, 2024). First, gender identities are considered the standards of behavior for males and females in society (Lin et al., 2020). Primarily, females are identified with the feminine gender identity, and males are identified as having the masculine gender identity (Kabil et al., 2022). For example, one's feminine gender identity is reflected in the thoughts that a woman is responsible for a clean and tidy house (Wang & Xu, 2018). A study by Jayaweera (2024) states that tourists also specifically select female guides because of their perceptions of the gentle nature of women. Secondly, gender stereotypes in society are reflected in one's preconceptions of the roles of men and women in society. If one's behavior deviates from the socially accepted behavior or gender stereotype in society, then such behavior is penalized (Carrillo et al., 2020). Whenever

the behavior aligns with the gender stereotypes in society, society will reward such behavior (Wang & Xu, 2018).

Due to the parenting role of women, working mothers are considered less nurturing, less professionally competent, and commuted to occupations (Lin et al., 2020). Costa et al. (2017) added that the status of marital women in tourism may require women to seek permission from their family and spouses to engage in paid labor, while the demands of motherhood can disadvantage women in the workplace. Aligned with this social and gender role of society, still many women from non-western societies, such as Nepal and India, prioritize homemaking and childcare over employment roles. In addition, social sanctions are waiting for women's guidance if they are noticed to have any loopholes in performing duties to the husband, parents, and dependents (Costa et al., 2017). A research study by Kabil et al. (2022) on women tour guides has found that the gender stereotype of women making sexual relationships with male co-workers fails to improve their social status or gender identity in society. Moreover, gender stereotypes have resulted in a gendered division of labor in society and partial productivity of women in the tourism industry (Bilgi & Yazıcı Ayyıldız, 2023).

Research into gendered tourism until now has focused on the gender pay gap, sexist work practices, vertical and horizontal segregation, abusive employment practices, and sexual harassment. Despite the tourism industry's significant contribution to the economy's growth, there is an underrepresentation of women tour guides, the frontline service providers in this sector. However, there is no evidence regarding how the gender and social role of women create career challenges in the tour guiding sector, hindering females' active participation in the Nepal tour and trekking industry.

2.3 Issues that female guides face

2.3.1. Sexual harassment

Harassment is defined as unwanted sexual attention in the workplace or any outdoor place and is regarded as the most pervasive form of violence against women (Alrawadieh et al., 2021). However, Mousa et al. (2023) argued that while males can also be victims of harassment, there seems to be a consensus that females are the typical targets. Sexual harassment has received considerable attention across several disciplines, yet its prevalence is more evident in the tourism and hospitality industry (Alrawadieh et al., 2021). This is due to several factors, including the

highly gendered environment of tourism, the intense interaction between service providers (i.e., employees and customers), job expectations, and the power imbalance between customers and employees (Cheung et al., 2018). Academic research on sexual harassment has concentrated predominantly on the influence of sexual harassment on victims (Alrawadieh & Alrawadieh, 2020). However, a challenging issue in this line of research stems from the complexity of the phenomenon and the lack of an agreed definition of sexual harassment (Conte, 1994).

Sexual harassment is a multidimensional construct that can involve several situations ranging from gender harassment (e.g., general sexist remarks or jokes) to sexual assault (e.g., attempts at fondling) (Cheung et al., 2017). It is also recognized as a pervasive form of gender-based violence. The topic has been the focus of researchers in several fields, including the military forces, academia, and the service industries. Several studies have also examined sexual harassment experienced by employees in the tourism, trekking, and hospitality sectors, including hotels, restaurants, airlines, casinos, and tour operations (Cheung et al., 2018). These studies agreed on the negative impacts of sexual harassment on employees. High turnover, poor working relationships, and unfavorable psychological impacts were frequently highlighted in the literature. However, as noted by Morgan and Pritchard (2019), researchers have largely failed to identify the consequences and impacts of sexual harassment in the realm of tourism. There is also limited engagement in tourism research with the notion of gender-based violence.

It is widely recognized that sexual harassment is prevalent in the service (tourist) industry because of the ambiguity of the interactions during the delivery of service and the unusual working hours and working conditions (Hutchings et al., 2020). Factors such as hierarchical structures of organization, low job status of employees, levels of social interaction and communication between employees of all levels, job expectations, and the sexualized image that few organizations want to promote make the employees within the industry more vulnerable to harassment. Furthermore, as Díaz-Meneses et al. (2020) point out, much of the tourism industry involves social environments where workers are expected to satisfy the needs of tourists. According to Russen et al. (2020), women may experience harassment from their colleagues, bosses, or even clients. This problem is particularly aggravated for the employees of hotels, restaurants, and tour guides. Female tour guides often get harassed by tourists and their colleagues due to the requirement for higher-level

interactions (Kc, 2013). The high rates of employee turnover and employment of temporary workers further make it hard to have a stable and safe work environment (Kc, 2013). Moreover, most of the tourism jobs are seasonal; hence, most employees are temporary workers, so workers are not motivated to fight for long-term solutions or the help of employers (Russen et al., 2020). This transient nature also means that cases of harassment are many and go unreported since the employees might feel that there is little point in seeking justice if they do not plan to stay long (Cheung et al., 2017). In addition, many employees in the tourism industry also accept harassment as "part of their job" and are forced to deny the existence of such incidents. This kind of denial may be a result of the patience that is the requirement of service-oriented industries and also the lack of clearly articulated and supportive policies protecting employees from sexual harassment. According to Díaz-Meneses et al. (2020), the existence of a power dynamic between hospitality/tourism employees and guests increases the vulnerability of low-power employees to sexual harassment.

2.3.2 Gender discrimination

Gender in a broad form has been considered as a mechanism of inequality between females and males, and gender relations are characterized by power and norms that disadvantage females and advantage males (Kokkranikal et al., 2024). As Hutchings et al. (2020) argue, 'gender inequality is how the meanings assigned to sex and gender as social categories create disparities in resources such as income, power, and status. Gender-based inequalities are largely rooted in society, culture, politics, and history, as well as the cycle of power relations between women and men, which intersect to produce a complex range of inequalities and oppression (Kokkranikal et al., 2024). These inequalities are not limited to society but are also reciprocated in workplaces, where women gain lower rewards than men, have limited opportunities for career advancement, and lag behind men on most dimensions of job quality (Mitra et al., 2022). Gender inequality is manifest in the segregated nature of labor markets, where women are horizontally segregated into different gendered functional areas and vertically segregated within different levels, often lower, of responsibility in the same organization (Laidey & Imthinan, 2024). Even though workplaces today have nearly equal numbers of men and women, men often ride what is known as a glass escalator, while women are blocked by the glass ceiling in their career development path (Costa et al., 2017).

Solutions to gender inequalities and segregation, thus, depend on factors that reside not only within the organization but also in family and society.

Gender discrimination is pervasive in the trekking and tourism industry due to the nature of the job (Hutchings et al., 2020). Theories of gender inequality assert that females' position in most situations is distinctive from males due to their treatment as inadequate and disadvantaged (Je et al., 2020). There is an optimistic view, supported by evidence, that tourism can improve gender equality through employment opportunities for women and enhancements in the social status of women (Díaz-Meneses et al., 2020b). However, an emerging trend in the literature highlights issues in tourism development and gender equality. For instance, Hutchings et al. (2020) find that females in Petra hold an unfavorable view of the tourism industry's impact on their economic status despite the presence of many barriers to employment in the sector. Je et al. (2020) noted that women are often employed at low pay and hold a low status in many developing countries.

Research in the tourism sector from a gender perspective is still in its early stages in the context of Nepal, as researchers' viewpoints indicate that a patriarchal society within an ancient feudal social, cultural, and economic system discourages females from assuming responsibilities and duties that are traditionally subservient to males (Hillman, 2019). Patriarchal society is a structural barrier for tour guides, permeating all aspects of social and cultural life. The patriarchal system reproduces stereotypes. As Jesús Carrasco-Santos et al. (2024) express, patriarchy is more than the father's dominance. "The term means "rules of the father," but in its current practical usage, it more often refers to any kind of system superiority of man and female inferiority." Women's situations have many similarities in different Asian countries. Gender inequality in the job market in the tourism sector is apparent in statistics (Kc, 2013).

Additionally, the dual role and huge burden of responsibility weaken the position of women in authority sharing and resolution-making (Hillman & Radel, 2012). According to Laidey & Imthian (2024), women often experience heightened pressure as they strive to balance their careers with the predominant housework responsibilities. This presents a significant career barrier for those women who seek to advance their careers. Mirror (2022) confirms that increased work

demands from both sides reduce working mothers' perceived ability to become the ideal partner; however, in contrast, increased work demands experienced by working fathers do not.

The absence of required government policies related to issues safeguarding indigenous females under minority status and unstable implementation styles can be perceived as one of the key reasons for the low involvement of females in trekking tourism in Nepal (Grossman-Thompson, 2015). Similarly, the capacity of Nepali women to be employed as tour and trekking guides is challenged frequently at the time. For them to leave their household and village for employment is still viewed negatively by males in Nepali society and culture (Je et al., 2020).

2.3.3 Work-life unbalance

Work-life balance is the overall satisfaction with balancing work and personal life (Gupta, 2021). Work-life balance is, for example, associated with increased work engagement and job performance at the individual level, as well as improved organizational performance (Björk-Fant et al., 2024). Work-life balance measures how effectively and efficiently an individual can allocate personal time, resources, and energy between their work and non-work roles (Sun et al., 2023). Non-work roles encompass family and other domains that require personal energy, time, and commitment (Russen et al., 2020). According to Bellmann et al. (2022), nowadays, everyone is in a competition where people must prove their skills best in daily life to survive and maintain their livelihood. This mental stress and pressure often result in decreased productivity and efficiency (Gupta, 2021).

Work-life imbalance, also known as work-life unbalance, is a situation where an individual's work and personal life are out of balance (Gupta, 2021). Work-life imbalance occurs when a person spends too much time on work-related tasks and activities and not enough time on self-care, family, or leisure activities (Aziz & Cunningham, 2008). In the context of women, they are traditionally considered caregivers, caring for their families. They may respond differently than men when work-family conflict occurs. From a cultural perspective, cultural expectations and gender challenges influence women's work-life balance and social sustainability (Russen et al., 2020). They work hard in both their jobs and households. Because women strongly identify themselves with their family role, they may feel guilty when their family needs conflict with their job, which

makes it difficult for women to participate in other roles (Alemada, 2019). Additionally, due to biased external expectations, she will also be expected to have different priorities and may be met with blame. Houge Mackenzie et al. (2020) agreed with Alemada (2019) and expressed their view that the conflicting nature of the tour guide occupation, with its long hours and intensive job duties, may also contradict socially expected roles for women, leading some to prioritize family obligations over their career life (Costa et al., 2017). This conflict can lead to stress, burnout, and dissatisfaction with life. Furthermore, it can negatively affect a woman's health, relationships, and overall well-being (Mackenzie et al. (2020).

It is essential to establish clear boundaries between work and personal time, prioritize self-care, and allocate time for important activities to achieve a balanced work-life balance (Janes & Wisnom, 2011). Deery & Jago (2009) argue that longer hours are consistently associated with worse work-life outcomes on all our work-life measures.' Such findings suggest an unhealthy acceptance of long working hours, especially in the tourism industry (Naidoo et al., 2019). What is equally important, particularly for female workers, is that long hours are unsocial and often mean that there is little flexibility in how such workers conduct their social and family lives (Sun et al., 2023). Ultimately, a lack of flexibility in the workplace often leads to employees leaving the industry, not just the organization, further exacerbating the labor shortages being experienced in a range of industries (Bellmann et al., 2022).

2.3.4. Sanitation and hygiene issues

Hygiene is the first component in disease prevention. Good personal hygiene means people do not invite disease and thus have better health. Inadequate sanitation and hygiene pose a significant health challenge in many low-income countries, including Nepal. Only 46% of the population in Nepal has access to improved sanitation facilities (Bhatta et al., 2023). According to Kokkranikal et al. (2024), public toilet availability and quality are also poor due to a lack of proper infrastructure. Guides and travelers have also experienced poor public toilets and sanitation practices during their visit to Nepal (Kokkranikal et al., 2024). While the absence of toilets at public bus stations and in camps is itself a concern, and without adequate toilets in public areas, vulnerable groups, including women and girls needing to use toilets, are left with a higher risk of getting bacteria and diseases. According to Bauer (2021), hygiene relating to menstrual becomes

a challenge when toilets are unavailable and unusable while doing a trek for females, as the date of starting periods is unpredictable, or the flow could be unexpectedly heavy. Potential 'accidents,' i.e., bleeding through clothes, are embarrassing, especially when remedial action is hours away (Christopher & Miller, 2007). Many women use sanitary pads combined with the largest tampon to prepare. However, Bauer (2021) argues that the more blood accumulates, the higher the chance for bacteria to grow and produce odor over time (Bauer, 2021). At the time, wipes may be a quick solution, but running water and soap are the best. Many women like to keep their menstruation secret and are embarrassed by talking and dealing with changing and disposing of products while working outdoors (Trego, 2009). On a practical note, ideally, keep all supplies in a ziplock bag, including necessary items such as sanitary products, toilet paper, hand wipes, feminine wipes, soap leaves, or mini bottles of liquid soap, as well as disposal bags (Chrallowher & Miller, 2007).

2.3.5 Risk during trek

Risk during a trek is defined as the possibility of suffering from any misfortune in a tourist destination or traveling (Shengxiang She et al., 2019). Similarly, as defined by Hillman and Radel (2019), risk is a distinctive, worldwide, and transformative description of current existence. He added that risk and leisure activities are no longer a factor in daily existence, so risk must increasingly be pursued in tourism encounters. Risks are occasionally not more than collective or shared perceptions, with the conscious or unconscious objective of conserving a cultural norm (Reisinger & Mavondo, 2005). Risks while traveling are routinely 'authentic' when equated with, for example, natural calamities, physical situations, conditions, and regulation breaks. Compared to physical and other goods, travel services, particularly those involved in adventure tourism in remote areas, have a higher risk; therefore, risk perception is a primary factor that can help explain tourism consumer behavior and influence tourism decision-making (Andrea, 2021). Additionally, the risks associated with travel destinations are multidimensional (Reisinger & Mavondo, 2005). Tourists' perception of various risk dimensions mainly refers to the consequences that may occur in any situation during travel. Therefore, researchers such as Shengxiang She et al. (2019) have begun to pay the required attention to identifying, assessing, and evaluating the dimensions of risk associated with tourism destinations.

Most of the theory of risk perception in tourism has focused on assessing cognitive attributes, which refer to the risks and obstacles each traveler may face during their journey (Fuchs & Reichel, 2011). In addition, Reichel et al. (2007) state that the Protection motivation theory guides risk perception. He further proposed the concept of risk as feelings, claiming that emotion explains a wide range of risk-related decisions and reveals that both affective and cognitive risk perceptions have a direct impact on decision-making. Slovic, P., & Peters, E. (2006) supported the idea that the risk-as-feelings theory recognizes that people experience risk in two ways, as well as the possibility that cognitive and affective risk assessments are linked. Since then, other researchers have discovered that perceived travel risks elicit affective responses such as anxiety, fear of death, and worry, which are significantly negatively correlated with visit intention (Reichel et al., 2007).

3. Empowerment

Empowerment refers to the process by which individuals gain the ability to make strategic life choices, particularly in contexts where this ability was previously denied to them (Kabeer, 1999). It is a multidimensional concept involving access to resources, agency, and achievements (Malhotra, Schuler, & Boender, 2002). For marginalized groups, including women, empowerment entails overcoming social barriers and structural inequalities (Rowlands, 1997). In the tourism sector, empowerment enables women to not only secure income and independence but also to reshape gender norms and participate more equally in public and professional spaces. Scheyvens (2000) highlights that empowerment in tourism must be understood across economic, social, psychological, and political dimensions, all of which are particularly relevant to women entering male-dominated roles such as trekking and guiding.

Kabeer (1999) and Scheyvens (2000) both stress that empowerment is not limited to access to economic resources. Rather, it involves the capacity to use those resources to make meaningful choices and take action. For women working in tourism, this includes leadership opportunities, control over income, and recognition within their communities. Tajeddini, Ratten, and Denisa (2017) argue that increased female participation in tourism leadership roles helps challenge gender stereotypes and supports a broader shift toward gender equality in the industry. They highlight how tourism provides space for women to redefine their roles and identities through entrepreneurial and professional engagement. Similarly, Gurung and DeCoursey (1994) point out

that while tourism in Nepal has traditionally favored male participation, it also holds the potential to empower women by offering them economic independence and visibility, provided they are given equal opportunities and access to training.

Structural limitations, however, continue to restrict the full realization of empowerment for many women in Nepal. Acharya (2003) emphasizes the need for institutional reforms, including gender-sensitive budgeting, affirmative hiring, and legal protections to ensure equitable participation. She argues that without proactive state intervention, women will continue to face systemic exclusion. In an earlier study, Acharya (2001) also highlighted how the absence of supportive infrastructure and policy undermines women's ability to fully participate in sectors like tourism. While these top-down approaches are crucial, they must also account for intersectional barriers. Legal reforms alone may not address the complex realities faced by women from marginalized castes and ethnic groups, who often experience multiple layers of discrimination (Acharya, 2003; Gurung & DeCoursey, 1994). These studies suggest that empowerment in tourism must be approached with sensitivity to social hierarchies and cultural biases that persist even within progressive sectors.

Together, the literature shows that women's empowerment in Nepal's trekking and tourism industry requires both institutional change and broader societal transformation. Equal access to training, safety, professional recognition, and policy support are key components that must be addressed to ensure women are not only present in the field but are also respected and supported as professionals

3.1 Economic Empowerment

Economic empowerment is a crucial aspect of women's advancement, particularly in male-dominated sectors such as tourism. Kabeer (1999) defines economic empowerment as the process by which individuals gain the ability to make strategic life choices in contexts where this ability was previously denied. This includes access to income, resources, and the agency to make financial decisions. In the tourism industry, such empowerment is associated with enhanced autonomy and visibility for women (Scheyvens, 2000).

However, structural barriers continue to constrain women's economic empowerment in Nepal. These include limited access to training, discriminatory employment practices, and unequal

inheritance and property rights (Acharya, 2010; Gurung & DeCoursey, 1994). Acharya (2010) emphasizes that economic empowerment must include access to assets, credit, and institutional support in addition to income generation. Gurung and Bista (2022) further note that economic decision-making within households and communities in rural Nepal remains male-dominated, which restricts women's ability to invest in tourism-related careers. Scheyvens (2000) asserts that women's participation in tourism can foster empowerment only when it leads to genuine control over income and improved social status. Yet, in the trekking industry, female guides often remain confined to lower-paying roles and face skepticism from clients and employers regarding their capabilities (Simkhada, 2020). Gender-based disparities in training, wages, and career progression continue to hinder the economic advancement of women in the trekking sector.

Tajeddini, Ratten, and Denisa (2017) argue that tourism entrepreneurship and employment provide avenues for women to challenge traditional gender roles. Their research highlights the role of tourism in enhancing women's status both within the household and in broader society. Nonetheless, in the context of Nepal, female trekking guides still encounter significant barriers to recognition and leadership, often needing to repeatedly prove their competence. Simkhada (2020) identifies persistent inequalities in resource access within Nepal's trekking industry. Women often lack equal access to gear, travel allowances, and promotional opportunities, which affects their ability to advance professionally and accumulate economic capital. These constraints undermine the long-term sustainability of women's careers in tourism.

Chant (2012) and Ferguson (2011) critique empowerment narratives that place the burden of poverty alleviation on women without addressing systemic gender inequalities. Their work warns against celebrating women's resilience in tourism without providing adequate structural support, legal protections, and fair compensation. This concern is relevant in Nepal, where women trekking guides frequently work under unsafe or informal conditions without legal safeguards. Upadhayaya (2013) argues that economic empowerment in tourism must be supported by gender-sensitive policies and planning. His research emphasizes the need for inclusive and equitable tourism development that facilitates women's access to dignified and sustainable employment opportunities.

The literature collectively underscores that economic empowerment for women in Nepal's trekking industry requires more than participation; it demands comprehensive policy support, institutional reform, and active removal of structural barriers to financial independence and career mobility.

3.2 Social Empowerment

Social empowerment refers to the processes through which individuals, particularly women, gain the ability to exercise agency, challenge discriminatory social norms, and achieve recognition and respect within society (Kabeer, 1999). In Nepal, women face structural inequalities rooted in patriarchal values, which limit their participation in various professional sectors, including tourism (Gurung & DeCoursey, 1994).

According to Kabeer (1999), social empowerment involves the expansion of people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied. This perspective highlights the importance of both access to resources and the agency to use them effectively. In tourism-related professions, this includes women's capacity to assert themselves in public roles traditionally dominated by men. Simkhada (2020) notes that tourism in Nepal has historically been shaped by gendered norms, which assign leadership and technical roles to men while relegating women to support roles or domestic tasks. These gendered expectations continue to influence the hiring and training practices within the trekking sector, contributing to the underrepresentation of women as professional guides. Gurung and DeCoursey (1994) emphasize that gender roles in the trekking industry have been culturally constructed and maintained through informal norms and institutional barriers. Their study shows that women face not only limited access to training but also social resistance when attempting to take on roles that involve authority, mobility, and decision-making. They argue that social empowerment in this context requires a transformation in societal attitudes toward women's capabilities.

Pritchard, Morgan, and Ateljevic (2007) argue that tourism both reflects and reproduces broader social power structures, including gender inequality. Their research calls attention to how women's roles in tourism are often shaped by cultural narratives that limit their visibility and professional development. The authors advocate for approaches that challenge these narratives and promote gender-inclusive tourism environments. Scheyvens (2000) also contributes to the understanding

of social empowerment by linking it to women's sense of self-worth and social recognition within tourism. She states that social empowerment occurs when women involved in tourism gain respect within their communities and experience an increase in self-confidence and status.

Collectively, these studies underline that social empowerment in tourism is contingent on addressing both structural barriers and symbolic representations of women. In the context of Nepal's trekking sector, the literature emphasizes the role of gendered expectations, social perceptions, and limited institutional support in shaping women's professional experiences and opportunities

4. Capacity building

Capacity building plays a vital role in enabling women's meaningful participation in Nepal's trekking and tourism industry. Defined as the development of skills, resources, and confidence necessary for individuals and institutions to thrive in dynamic environments, capacity building is crucial for addressing gender disparities in tourism employment (UNDP, 2009). In male-dominated fields such as trekking, capacity building for women involves not only technical training but also empowerment through leadership development, financial literacy, and social support systems (Sharma & Kunwar, 2021; Tajeddini et al., 2017).

Programs such as the Annapurna Sanctuary Women's Trekking Guide Project have pioneered efforts to enhance women's technical competencies in trekking, offering training in areas like map reading, first aid, and mountain safety (Thapa, 2016). These initiatives, typically led by NGOs and local institutions, aim to equip women with the skills and confidence necessary to guide treks independently in high-altitude terrains. For instance, Empowering Women of Nepal (EWN) has long provided comprehensive training programs that combine outdoor survival skills with gender sensitization and leadership development, offering women more than just physical preparedness (EWN, 2022). As Thapa (2016) and Thapa (2013) both note, the significance of these programs lies not merely in technical instruction but in building the psychological readiness to navigate male-centric environments and undertake leadership roles.

Despite receiving certifications, many trained women still encounter significant barriers to employment. Lama (2018) reports that female guides are often overlooked for challenging trekking

routes due to persistent doubts about their physical strength and emotional stamina. This reflects wider gendered stereotypes in tourism, where women's roles continue to be perceived through a lens of domesticity and passivity (Hillman & Radel, 2022). These discriminatory hiring practices reveal how technical training alone is insufficient to dismantle entrenched gender norms within trekking companies. Lama (2018, p. 92) states, “despite their certificates, many women are denied work on high passes,” highlighting the gender bias that limits the impact of capacity-building efforts. Similarly, Simkhada (2020) notes that trekking agencies often remain skeptical of women's capacity to lead in remote terrains, and that such skepticism contributes to their underrepresentation on high-profile routes like the Manaslu or Annapurna Circuit.

In addition to physical training, capacity-building programs increasingly incorporate soft skills such as English language proficiency, financial literacy, and business development knowledge. These skills are especially important for women seeking to work as freelancers or to start their own businesses in tourism (Sharma & Kunwar, 2021). As Tajeddini et al. (2017) argue, women's economic empowerment through tourism must go beyond employment—it must include enabling entrepreneurship and independent decision-making. This approach is also supported by Kilgour (2007), who emphasized that training and capacity-building initiatives should integrate gender awareness to promote equitable economic participation. Enhancing women's economic agency through these tools reduces their dependency on male intermediaries and increases their bargaining power both at home and in the workplace.

Peer networks and mentorship programs also play a critical role in capacity building. Community-based organizations such as EWN and Women Empowerment Nepal (2022) have created informal support structures where female guides can share experiences, learn strategies, and build solidarity. These networks offer a critical emotional and professional support system for women who often face isolation on the trail and social pressures at home. According to EWN (2022), mentorship not only provides practical advice but also fosters resilience and collective empowerment among women navigating gendered workplaces. However, scholars caution that unless the broader trekking industry evolves to support gender-inclusive practices, the full potential of capacity-building programs may remain unrealized. Lama (2018) emphasizes that the effectiveness of training programs depends on parallel reforms in recruitment policies, workplace safety, and

organizational attitudes toward women's leadership. As Hillman and Radel (2022) observe, empowering women in adventure tourism requires both individual skill development and structural transformation of the patriarchal systems that control access to leadership roles. In the same vein, Sharma and Kunwar (2021) argue that meaningful change demands coordinated efforts between training institutions, employers, and government bodies to align policies and norms in support of gender equity.

4.1 Learning and Training Opportunities

In Nepal's trekking industry, the increasing participation of women has been greatly facilitated by specialized learning and training opportunities. These programs are designed to equip women with the essential skills needed for roles such as trekking guides, porters, and expedition leaders. For many women, these training programs represent a significant step towards achieving economic independence and contributing to the tourism sector. These initiatives, often led by NGOs and local training institutions, provide instruction in various technical areas such as map reading, first aid, high-altitude survival, guiding ethics, and outdoor leadership.

Thapa (2016) discusses the positive impact of programs like the Annapurna Sanctuary Women's Trekking Guide Project, stating, "These programs not only impart vital technical knowledge but also create a network of women who support each other in navigating this traditionally male-dominated field." These training opportunities are not just about technical skills; they also foster a sense of community and empowerment. Women who participate in such programs gain confidence, build relationships with other women in the field, and enhance their ability to succeed in the competitive trekking industry.

This aligns with Scheyvens (2000), who emphasizes that genuine empowerment in tourism is not just economic, but also psychological and social. The sense of self-efficacy and increased confidence among women guides in Nepal illustrates this multi-dimensional empowerment. Moreover, Hillman and Radel (2022) argue that skill-building initiatives in adventure tourism challenge entrenched gender norms by enabling women to claim public and physical space traditionally dominated by men, such as mountain trails and expedition leadership. These programs often focus on both the practical aspects of trekking and the interpersonal skills required for guiding, such as communication, leadership, and customer service. The well-rounded approach

ensures that women are prepared for the diverse challenges they may face in the field. According to Sherpa (2020), "The knowledge gained from these courses is empowering, but it also serves as a tool for breaking stereotypes about women's roles in the outdoors." As Kilgour (2007) notes, training initiatives that integrate both technical and soft skills are essential in building not just competence but long-term capacity for women in male-dominated industries.

Beyond technical skills, these programs also emphasize safety, which is a critical aspect of trekking in Nepal's challenging terrain. Safety training includes high-altitude medical protocols, emergency response, and weather forecasting, all of which are essential for ensuring the well-being of trekkers and guides alike. Lama (2018) highlights how "safety training is not just for the protection of clients, but also for the personal confidence of women guides, enabling them to make informed decisions in high-stress situations." Simkhada (2020) further explains that such safety training enhances women's credibility in the eyes of clients and employers, which is particularly important in a sector where women are still underrepresented. This credibility can challenge prevailing assumptions that women are less capable of handling physically demanding or high-risk roles in tourism.

As these training programs gain popularity, they are becoming more accessible to women from various backgrounds. Efforts to expand access to training have included initiatives targeting rural women and those from marginalized communities. These efforts ensure that the opportunities to work as trekking guides are not limited to women from urban areas, but reach a broader demographic, promoting greater diversity within the field. Sharma and Kunwar (2021) note that "training programs now reach communities that were once excluded, providing women with the tools to participate in Nepal's tourism economy." Thapa (2013) supports this view, pointing out that rural women's participation in tourism is often limited not by lack of interest, but by lack of access to education and training opportunities.

While the number of women completing training programs has steadily increased, the focus on hands-on, practical experience continues to be a key component of these initiatives. Field-based training, where women are guided through actual trekking experiences, helps bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and real-world application. This aspect of training allows women

to build their confidence in managing groups, navigating challenging terrain, and providing exceptional service to trekkers. Pung et al. (2022) suggest that experiential learning is especially impactful in tourism-related training, as it allows women to internalize knowledge through active participation, reflection, and feedback. These practices help women develop a sense of mastery and professional identity, which is crucial for long-term retention in the sector.

In summary, learning and training opportunities in Nepal's trekking industry are crucial for empowering women and helping them to build successful careers in the sector. By focusing on comprehensive skills development, safety training, and community-building, these programs provide women with the tools they need to succeed in the field. As Thapa (2016) concludes, "Training programs are not just educational; they are transformative, allowing women to carve out their space in an industry that was once closed to them."

4.2 Awareness and Changing Perceptions

In Nepal, raising awareness about women's participation in trekking has been a key factor in slowly changing how both the community and the industry perceive women in the sector. Over the years, many awareness programs have been introduced through media campaigns, community meetings, and school outreach. These programs have helped highlight the value and capabilities of women in trekking, challenging long-standing gender stereotypes.

Rai (2020) notes that the visibility of successful female trekkers has played a significant role in shifting public opinion. Successful women who have worked as guides or porters have become role models, helping to inspire younger generations, especially in urban areas. The media has shared stories about these women, making it clear that women are capable of performing the same demanding physical tasks as their male counterparts. Rai (2020) explains that this increased visibility is vital because it shows that women can thrive in roles traditionally dominated by men. This process of reshaping gender norms is also discussed by Hillman and Radel (2022), who argue that the participation of women in outdoor adventure fields like trekking contributes to the redefinition of gender roles in public and physical spaces. These visible shifts help challenge deep-rooted patriarchal assumptions about women's physicality and independence.

However, despite these positive developments, Shrestha (2019) points out that the awareness and acceptance of women in trekking are not uniform across the country. While urban and semi-urban areas have generally been more open to women taking on trekking-related jobs, rural and more conservative areas still show resistance. In these areas, women who work in trekking are often subject to judgment, particularly if they travel with male tourists or spend nights away from home. Shrestha (2019) suggests that even though awareness is growing, it remains more superficial in these areas and has not led to a deep change in traditional attitudes.

This tension between progress and resistance is also highlighted by Thapa (2013), who emphasizes that social transformation in Nepal's tourism sector is uneven, particularly where traditional gender roles remain strongly entrenched. In many rural communities, tourism-related work by women is still seen as inappropriate or risky, even when women have the necessary training and experience. Despite these challenges, awareness campaigns have contributed to slowly changing the way people think, especially in younger generations. The stories of successful women trekkers continue to inspire others to consider trekking as a viable profession, and the positive images of women in this field are slowly gaining acceptance. Rai (2020) explains that as more women take on roles in trekking, the public perception of women's ability to succeed in such roles will continue to evolve. While the awareness programs are helping in many areas, the extent to which they have impacted the perception of women in trekking can vary depending on the region. In more traditional parts of Nepal, the resistance to women in trekking professions remains, but overall, these awareness efforts are crucial in continuing the process of change. The work done to increase the visibility of women in trekking is beginning to shift cultural norms, although it is clear that these changes take time and are a work in progress.

Chapter 3

Methodology

The chapter of this thesis illustrates the methodological approaches to explore the challenges female tour guides face in Nepal. Given the subjective nature of issues faced by women in tourism, this research follows an interpretive research philosophy, allowing for an in-depth understanding of individual experiences. Similarly, an inductive research approach was used to develop patterns and themes from the data rather than testing hypotheses. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with female tour guides, allowing females to share their experiences and perspectives in detail and flexibility in their responses to collect rich qualitative data. The collected data was then analyzed by using thematic analysis, identifying themes and insights related to the challenges faced by women guides in the trekking field, their roles in the tourism industry as women, and broader industry dynamics. Later, the chapter also includes a discussion of the ethical concerns raised and subsequently addressed. Lastly, the final section of the chapter provides an overview of the limitations of the research.

3.1. Research Philosophy: Interpretivism

Research philosophy refers to the assumptions and philosophies made by the author in every step of the research, which can be related to the nature of reality tackled in research, which shapes the way the author studies research objectives (Ontological assumptions), related to the knowledge which consists of acceptable, valid and legitimate knowledge (Epistemological assumptions) (Burrell & Amp; Morgen, 1979), and how the role of value and ethics of author influence research process (Axiological assumption) (Saunders et al., 2016). The well-structured philosophy of research will contribute to the further structure of the research approach, methodological choice, and data collection methods.

How do we perceive the social world throughout this research? Interpretivism is interested in human actions, behaviors, and the differences within these actions or activities (Bryman, 2016, p.27). As Bryman (2016, p.27) explains, the interpretivist seeks to understand the meaning and knowledge behind human behavior in a social context. A concern for the individual characterizes the interpretive paradigm. The fundamental objective of the interpretive model is to understand the subjective world of human experience and phenomena, a requirement necessitated by the

distinctness of humans against the natural order. It seeks to understand a phenomenon by the meanings people attribute to it (Saunders et al., 2016).

How does this thesis relate to interpretivism? This research intends to understand the situations of female working trekking guides in the tourism sector, which emphasizes understanding the subjective experiences and social meanings that individuals attach to their reality, which translated into the interpretive view is a way of understanding the actions that happen with women in the trekking and tourism industry (Bryman, 2016). The primary goal of this paradigm is to comprehend the abstract universe of human experience, a prerequisite required by the peculiarity of the people as against the standard direction (Bryman 2016: 28). Additionally, this research is designed to increase understanding of phenomena within cultural and contextual situations, where the phenomenon of interest is to examine in its natural setting and from the perspective of the research participants (Bernard, 2013). Similarly, the interpretive paradigm is relevant philosophy for qualitative research undertaken due to the focus on the subjective beliefs of the participants, which needs to be understood concerning the local context (Wang, 2015). In addition, we intend to investigate the social issues women face, how they are empowered in the trekking field through capacity building initiatives such as trainings. Thus, we have taken on the interpretive philosophy of science to understand the social world based on both assumptions (ontology and epistemology), as it considers the truth and the distinctiveness of humans and sees them as subjective individuals and social constructions.

3.2 Research Approach – Inductive

This thesis adopts an inductive approach. Generally, two research approaches involve theory: deduction and induction. In the deductive approach, research begins with developing a theory and hypothesis, and then the research strategy is designed to test that hypothesis (Saunders et al., 2009). In the inductive approach, research begins with data collection, and then the theory is developed based on data collection analysis (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 124). In this research, the inductive approach is more relevant as the collected data is first analyzed, and then explanations of the phenomena are developed by theories on female trekking guides in tourism.

3.3. Time Horizon: Cross-sectional

Regarding the time horizon of the research, due to the limited time constraint of the master's thesis, this study is a purely cross-sectional study. Cross-sectional research involves studying a specific phenomenon at certain time constraints, and that is from Feb 2025 to June 2025; therefore, this thesis follows a cross-sectional time horizon of approximately five months (Saunders et al., 2016).

3.4. Methodological Choice: Qualitative

There are three main ways that researchers use methodological choices for data collection: quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods. (Corbin & Amp; Strauss, 2008). The choice of methodological method depends on the research philosophy and approach. First, the quantitative method is used to examine the relationship between different variables in a numerical manner commonly associated with deductive approaches. The qualitative research method represents the study of participants, meanings, and relationships to develop a conceptual or theoretical framework. Likewise, mixed methods research design is considered the source of multiple research methods developed from the combination of both methods (Qualitative and quantitative) (Saunders et al., 2016).

Why qualitative? The qualitative approach is related to developing explanations of social phenomena through the questions "what, why, and how." A generally qualitative method is applied to study people's experiences, relationships with their surroundings, and meaning-making processes (Levy, 2017, p.24). Also, in qualitative research, people are considered the main character of the research rather than just variables; therefore, it enlightens the context and situation of people (female guides). To clarify our research, the qualitative method applied in this study is interviews with female trekking guides. The reason is to collect correct and appropriate data to answer the research question. Also, the qualitative approach assists in in-depth analysis of the subject matter (Taylor et al., 2014). Moreover, using this approach, we strive to achieve complete and detailed information regarding the subject of study.

3.5 Data Collection Method

3.5.1 Primary Data Collection

The decision on data collection follows the selection of a research methodology (Bryman, 2012). Research papers mainly use two categorized data types: primary and secondary. This paper integrates data collected from both primary research and secondary literature.

Primary data is first-hand data collected by the researcher as an outcome of their interaction with the individuals regarding the research topic. According to Saunders (2016), primary data means the information collected directly for a specific research question using the most suitable methods. The basic instruments used for collecting primary data are interviews, observations, and surveys. The reason for using this kind of method is that the researcher believes that the process of information gathering is closest to the truth (Edwards, 2009). This research collected primary data through semi-structured online interviews with female tour guides who work as tour and trekking guides, and data was collected through an online platform.

3.5.1.1 Semi-structured interview

Interviews are a prevalent data collection method in qualitative research. The types of interviews are structured, semi-structured, or unstructured and designed based on what information is necessary to extract from the research (Bryman, 2012). Semi-structured interviews have been carried out for this research to collect data regarding issues of female guides in tourism. According to Saunders et al. (2016) and (Bryman, 2012), researchers have a list of topics and possible questions to be covered for this type of interview, which may vary from one interview to another interview and can be depending on the flow of the interview process; the researcher may decide to omit some questions.

Before taking an interview, we asked participants if there have any language preferences, and almost all of them said that they were more comfortable with their native language, Nepali, so we followed the interviews in the Nepali language as it was the comfortable language for them to speak with us. However, one of them gave interview in English language and one gave through writing. These linguistic choices allowed more in-depth conversations and enabled participants to express their feelings without hesitations. After that, the interview started with a short introduction to the purpose of it. The interview for this process is divided into sections of questions, includes

background information, the perception of gender about female working guides in Tourism, their issues of causes, skill building programs and empowerment. We followed a one-to-one interview procedure with the female working tour guides using open-ended rather than closed-ended questions. We also let them control the interview process so that they can be open during the whole interview time. Letting them control the interview helped us to gather more information. The interview participants were five female trekking guides, as our topic is primarily related to them, and they were chosen based on their direct link with their employment in the tour field. Similarly, telephonic interviews through WhatsApp and Facebook were conducted for semi-structured interviews as it was not possible to do face-to-face interviews due to the distance, and the choice of medium was based on the interviewee's convenience. We were also aware that the online interviews may not offer similar opportunities as we cannot see their body language and understand the meaning behind their facial expression. However, it was efficient in that they were not nervous and could express their understanding based on their experiences.

The interview was taken as a primary source of data collection as per the method and research aim, which would lead toward addressing the research problem and gap. Additionally, these types of questionnaires grant more freedom to the researchers to steer the conversations as per their goals and needs for their research while interviewing (Bryman, 2012). This method has been advantageous because it allows researchers like us to gather deep, rich, and comprehensive data from a few females.

3.5.1.2 Sampling Method: Self-selection sampling

This thesis follows self-selection sampling, one of the categories under volunteer sampling from the main branch of non-probability sampling. Self-selection sampling allows participants to identify their desire to participate in the research process. Since the thesis is based on the female trekking guide perspective and the advantage of self-selected sampling is that the interviewee who chooses to volunteer for the research already has "strong feelings or opinions" about the research objective and topic, so the outcome is very much likely to be productive and enrich which is what researchers are seeking (Saunders et al., 2016).

In order to get in touch with volunteer interviewees first, the Facebook post was posted in a group named Trekking & Tour with female guide Nepal, Female trekking guide, Female Trekking & Mountaineering guides Nepal, asking if anyone from that network is working as a female guide in Nepal and want to volunteer for an interview where three participants self-selected themselves for interview after asking us further about the topic and the reason behind interview. The utilization of several channels like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok enabled us to interact with participants from various regions, boosting accessibility and reaching a larger demographic of female guides in Nepal. Later, the three interviewees were contacted by the messenger app, and then we requested to conduct an interview through the WhatsApp app as it is easier to record a voice from WhatsApp rather than the Messenger app. The later author asked 9/10 females guides, trekking organization staff, and other members randomly via email, TikTok messages, and Facebook messages; however, due to a busy schedule, peak season and unknown reasons, altogether only five candidates showed interest in the interview. Those remaining volunteer candidates were later contacted by sending an email and WhatsApp numbers, which were provided when they self-selected themselves for the interview. Further, after deciding the time with them, we took an interview the same as above from WhatsApp. Among the five interviews, three were voice-recorded in Nepali, one was voice-recorded in English, and one was conducted through written text messaging. Due to the promise of anonymity, interviewees are mentioned by code number; however, the platform used for a virtual interview, work duration, and status are mentioned below in the table:

Assigned code	Status/Location/Duration	Date	length	Interview platform
FTG-01	Unmarried/Gorkha/08 year	5-March	33.19 min	Whatsapp
FTG-02	Divorced/Pokhara/8 year	6-March	38.35 min	Whatsapp
FTG-03	Married/Kathmandu/4 year	9-March	Message	Facebook app
FTG-04	Married/ Bhaktapur/ 1.5 year	15-March	19.48 min	Whatsapp
FTG-05	Unmarried/ Syangja/ 6 year	27-March	18.46 min	Facebook app

Source: self-created

3.5.2 Secondary Data Collection

This research used varied academic papers, reports, and available online documents from the official tour guides' websites as secondary data. Similarly, we collected these data from different reliable resources, such as the AAU library, Google Scholar, Google Books, and ResearchGate search engines. Additionally, the materials collected were from various books, articles, case studies, statistics data summaries, administrative data, literature, research papers, books, etc. These secondary sources of papers were used in our research paper to develop our literature review and, at the same time, to support primary data collection through qualitative techniques. In addition to this, we have used various published information from the Tourism Board of Nepal's website and other agencies that work for females in the tourism field. Using secondary data has several pros, as it allows researchers to retain time and resources, and at the same time, it can be easily accessed (Saunders et al. (2009). However, secondary data is still represented by the fact that they were already collected for some other purposes and might not be able to match the study being conducted (Saunders et al., 2016).

3.6 Data Analysis -Thematic

This research is associated with interpretive philosophy, as follows by the qualitative approach. Therefore, to make sense of the subjective and the socially constructed meaning that the participant strongly expresses through spoken words and their stories are regarded as a key source of data. The qualitative data analysis in this thesis is from an inductive perspective as the author starts to collect data and then only exploits them to see which themes to concentrate on to develop a relationship between data and the research question. Regarding the data analysis, thematic analysis is applied in this thesis.

Thematic analysis is described as a qualitative method for identifying patterns or themes in collected data, allowing the researcher to evaluate important parts of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This type of analysis allows researchers to establish themes and patterns in the collected data set for further exploration. Moreover, thematic analysis in constructive philosophy permits the researcher to study and examine the meanings, realities, and experiences connected with the social world (Saunders et al., 2016). In this thesis, the thematic analysis explores the relationship and similarities between the piles of data. As the first step, data is carefully listened to again and again because most of the interviews were taken in Nepali language. Researchers tried to transcribe

the whole data, but researchers were only able to transcribe a certain few minutes of audio due to lengthy recordings. And it could take a huge amount of time and resources. Thus, in our thesis, the analysis of interview data was conducted without full transcription. Instead of complete data translation, a more pragmatic and focused approach was adopted. First, interviews were listened to again and again multiple times, and key important themes, quotes, and relevant things were noted directly from the audio. Secondly, initial general themes are produced according to the encountered meanings, recognized relationships, and common patterns. Then, as a third step, general themes are organized according to their similarities. As a fourth step, in search of themes, the general themes are reconciled and reviewed, and finally, these themes are named in accordance to match with the research problem (Saunders et al.,2016).

This approach allowed researchers to remain closely engaged with the tone, emotion, and their response context, which can sometimes be diluted in written transcripts. However, this approach requires rigorous note-taking as well as repeated listening to ensure accuracy and depth of analysis. To ensure credibility, detailed analytic memos were kept, and key parts of the interview were selectively transcribed when necessary to support findings.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues are essential to any research involving human subjects, mainly when dealing with sensitive themes. In our research on female guides in Nepal, we carefully observed ethical standards respecting participants' rights and privacy (Shrestha & Bhandari, 2019). We took steps to gain informed permission, which indicated that all participants were completely aware of the study's objective, how their data would be used, and that they may actively choose to participate (Wiles,2013). Additionally, we maintained confidentiality, which means that none of the participants' identifiable information or personal data was disclosed to the public (Bryman, 2016). To safeguard the privacy of their identities, participants were given pseudonyms. Additionally, we emphasized the participants' autonomy and comfort throughout the research process by granting them the freedom to leave the study at any moment without facing any consequences (Wiles, 2013). We were mindful of the social and cultural factors of Nepal's trekking industry to ensure participants felt comfortable sharing their stories. It may be challenging to have conversations about gender-based issues, so we ensured the participants felt valued and supported while they told

their personal stories. This strategy ensured that the study was carried out ethically and helped us reduce possible harm (Shrestha & Bhandari, 2019).

Ethical Considerations and Use of AI Tools

To support the writing and clarity of the thesis, the AI language model ChatGPT (developed by OpenAI) was used during the writing process. It served as a language assistant to help improve the academic tone, paraphrase some sections for better readability, and suggest ways to structure thematic analysis.

The researcher maintained full responsibility for all content, critical thinking, and interpretation. ChatGPT was not used to generate original research findings or conduct any form of data analysis independently. Its use was limited to editing support and language refinement, following ethical academic guidelines.

3.8 Research Validity

According to Creswell (2014), validity is the degree to which the research accurately and credibly captures the experiences of the participants and the phenomenon under study. The researchers gathered data Using various methods, including voice conversations on WhatsApp and social networking sites like Facebook. We obtained various viewpoints and supported the conclusions by comparing the information gathered from other sources (Denzin, 2017). By utilizing these platforms, we could confirm the replies' consistency and lower the possibility of bias in the data. We also informed the participants of our analysis and interpretations of the interview data. This allowed them to verify whether the results reflected their opinions and experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This procedure made it possible to ensure that the study accurately represented and recorded the voices of the female guides. Also, to improve the research's transferability, we gave readers thorough descriptions of the participants and the environment, enabling them to determine if the conclusions may apply to comparable circumstances or settings (Geertz, 1973). This helped to create relevancy and connectivity to other groups of female trekking guides. The researchers concluded by using critical thinking by constantly analyzing all the perspectives and results, and opinions or assumptions influence none of them; instead, everything is ensured by the facts (Creswell, 2014). By using these techniques, we increased the study's validity, and the findings accurately reflected the experiences of female guides working in Nepal's trekking sector.

3.9 Limitations of the Methodology

Even though it offers insightful information about the experiences of female trekking guides in Nepal, this study also has a few limitations due to its qualitative and interpretive nature. This study focuses on subjective meanings and socially constructed experiences, unlike positivist research, which emphasizes objective truths and statistical generalizability. As a result, traditional criteria for evaluating the quality of research, such as generalizability, do not apply in the same way. Instead, this study emphasizes transparency and recognizability to ensure the quality of research.

Transparency: The whole research process, including data collection, thematic analysis, and interpretation, is carefully documented to give a precise and repeatable explanation of how the results arrived. This assures that readers can assess the study's reliability and understand the logic behind interpretations.

Recognizability: The findings aim to be genuine and relatable to people in similar contexts. While the results are not universally generalizable, they are meant to resonate with female trekking guides and tourism professionals who encounter similar issues or challenges.

Context-Specific Nature: Because the study is firmly rooted in Nepal's socio-cultural reality, its conclusions could not hold in other geographical or cultural situations. Thick descriptions allow readers to judge if the findings apply to different contexts.

In addition, the semi-structured interviews mean that the data is shaped by participants' willingness to share their stories and the researcher's interpretive lens. Despite efforts to capture a range of perspectives, the results may not give a complete picture of the broader diversity of female trekking guides in Nepal, particularly those in urban sectors.

Future research could include a larger number of participants, incorporating participants from more diverse regions and backgrounds and applying mixed-method or longitudinal approaches to make the results more reliable and valuable in different situations.

Chapter 4

Analysis

In this chapter, we will analyze and review the data collected for this research. The data referred to are the conducted interviews with female trekking guides, as they provided us with insights into their perceptions, from their motivation to become a guide to gender empowerment, and the issues they face, such as harassment, work-life balance, hygiene, and risk in the tourism field. The data derived from the semi-structured interview approach and the analysis followed for this research is a thematic approach, which is divided mainly into three sections (The first analysis is about a tour guide, the second is about the issues (gender issues, Bullying, work-life unbalance, hygiene and risk and third is about capacity building and women empowerment).

4.1 Becoming a Trekking Guide

The trekking guides in this thesis are Nepali female guide trekkers on major trekking routes in Nepal. In Nepal, the occupation of trekking guides involves guiding tourists through the mountainous trekking routes of the Himalayas (Hillman, 2022). Each guide typically has a medium to high level of spoken English and often speaks other languages. They are also educated in the geography, culture, and natural surroundings of the Himalayas (Hillman, 2021).

Being familiar with diverse cultures is one of the interesting parts of this job for some of the trekking guides (FTG.01, 02). *"Travel is the experience of new weather; you will meet new people every time, new food, new wind, new atmosphere"* (FTG-04). Huge face-to-face connections with new tourists based on their personalities are a different and new experience for the guides where different cultures collapse and learn new things.

"I am so interested in learning more about intercultural practices in Nepal, so I joined this field, but the guide course is not easy, and classes used to be more practical. There is a limit, "Kota" (limited seats), for students who want to study to become trekking guides. You need to have a diploma (+2) education if you do not have experience in trekking, and if you have experience, you will need only an SLC (10th class) pass and almost four to five weeks of training to become a guide" (FTG-01).

Many female participants were attracted to this occupation because they were interested in intercultural things, and some came because they saw attractive earnings. However, the statement from FTG 01 also notes that the course of study is not easy, and the subject emphasizes practical and specific training. The mention of a quota ("Kota") system for course admission indicates a competitive entry process, which may hinder or support female participation depending on how inclusivity is managed within these limitations.

Also, almost all the participants discussed the training received through recognized facilities(institutions) for trekking guides in Kathmandu and other cities like Pokhara. Furthermore, the Nepal government recognizes the trekking guide course, and the training lasts between 35 days and 3 months (Nepal Guide, 2025). As one respondent said, *"One must pass a bachelor's degree in any faculty with an additional 3 months of training in NATHM (Nepal Academy of Tourism and Hotel Management) to be eligible for a tourist guide in Nepal"* (FTG-04). A bachelor's degree is needed to become a trekking guide; however, pursuing a bachelor's degree is difficult, especially in remote and rural areas in Nepal. Not enough educational institutions are available for higher studies all over the country. Only urban areas have those facilities; many people must migrate from their villages for educational purposes only.

The job of a tour guide is seasonal. There are mainly a few months (March to May) when tourists come in, so the job arises accordingly. Respondent says this:

"The work of a guide does not go on throughout the year. It is a seasonal job. The best season for it is from" Falgun to Jestha" (February/March) to (May/June). The rainy monsoon months of Asar and Shrawan (June/July) are especially considered the 'off-season.' From mid-Bhaddau (August/September), the trekking and guiding season starts again. After that, Poush and Magh's snowy winter months (December/January) are also considered 'off-season.'(FTG-03)

The nature of the trekking guide field in Nepal is not year-round. Mostly, it depends on the weather and seasons of Nepal. Roughly from March to June is identified as the best time for trekking, corresponding to late winter to early summer, which is ideal for mountain visits and safe trekking. Tourism trekking is more about freelancing jobs rather than having a fixed contract from an employer (Prakash et al., 2011). As stated by one of our respondents, the job proposal comes from

different hotels, travel agents, and agencies. This means those with a good network and who can maintain good relations may have more opportunities and income than the newcomers or those with few networks. It may be a demotivating factor for some of the workers. This is also supported by the interviewee, who says: *"My father and my relative uncle have quite a good network, so I got to choose the way I want to work" (FTG-02).*

Moreover, no assurance of steady income, policies, and government support has exposed females to a vulnerable position in the trekking sector, especially in the off-season. However, female guides are establishing their positions as more female tourists demand female trek guides for a trek due to their caring, safe, and responsible nature. *"A few agencies only ask for a female tour guide because the ladies are more careful" (FTG-03).* The standard feature of women is being careful about details, and this quality is an advantage for female employees in this occupation.

Somehow, the number of female guides is improving with aid from the Ministry of Tourism of Nepal and different trekking enterprises to create an environment and opportunities (Lama, 2013). Those organizations like Three Sisters and Women Empowerment Nepal operate trekking training, guiding skills, and empowering women. External development organizations like NGOs and INGOs have also helped Nepalese women cultivate their self-confidence and enthusiastically engage in tourism (Hillman & Radel, 2021; Gurung, 1995). Female trekking guides are financially satisfied; they earn a decent income during the season (FTG 01, FTG 02). Decent income is also attracting more females to the trekking industry. However, traditional patriarchal values and gender-based social expectations make it harder for Nepali females to participate and thrive in the trekking and tourism industry, especially in rural areas (Hillman & Radel, 2021). There has been a slight improvement in the number of female trekking guides, but not as much as required. Of the 17,164 licensed guides in Nepal, only 886 are female (Lama, 2014).

4.2 Career Barrier for Female Trekking Guides

4.2.1 Gender Roles

Gender roles emerge from cultural representations of what is expected of a woman and a man (Kabil et al., 2022). The allocation of family roles, such as domestic and family responsibilities, to women, is related to their alleged greater capacity for care, kindness, and sensitivity, while men are assigned the role of family provider due to characteristics associated with autonomy,

domination, and power (Jayaweera, 2024). There are specific roles and expectations of what women can and cannot do (Figueroa-Domecq & Segovia-Perez, 2020). After marriage, females are expected to care for the children and family, as well as manage the household chores. One married participant said this statement while asking about gender perception,

"At this moment, I am at work. I will trek to the Annapurna base camp region and return in a week. I do not work during the weekends, so I am with my family of four: my husband, son, and daughter. When I am at home, everyone wants to eat what I make, so this is what I do. My children complain that their father is not cooking well (laughs). Sometimes, I want to rest, but I cook and clean for the sake of my children" (FTG-04).

A gendered notion that women are good at household work (Wang & Xu, 2018) can occur from her statement as the participants here mention how children love the food which the mother cooks more than the father. Regardless of female guides' work status, women are socially conditioned to prioritize family and caregiving responsibilities, which can be evaluated through the lens of gender role theory. Women are socially and culturally expected to conduct household chores, given less decision-making power in the family, and generally suppressed under a patriarchal society (Kc, 2013). The fact that this weight still exists in spite of their professional contribution emphasizes how their dual workload is reinforced by the fact that paid labor does not release them from unpaid household tasks.

Within the family domain, women's gender roles are often centered around their female roles, such as mother and wife, which can pose contradictions when pursuing a career as a female tour guide. Two of our participants shared their experience of having to pause their jobs for a considerable period due to the demands of motherhood. However, they also revealed that they re-joined the workforce once their children got older and motherhood no longer interfered with their occupation as a tour guide.

"I worked in the field only up to my delivery. After that point, I stopped working for more than five years. Yeah, I took a long career break. I could return to work only after my children had grown". (FTG -02)

"My husband and in-laws expected me to be at home after I got pregnant. So, I took a break from the job for almost 5/6 years". (FTG-03)

Their experience reflects how females are expected to fulfill caregiving roles, even at the cost of their career development. Compared to men, women are often expected to hold their profession or completely abandon their careers during a significant stage of family life, such as early motherhood. The statement of female guides also underscores the lack of family as well as systemic support, such as sharing equal responsibility between husband and wife and a flexible working environment that could enable women to maintain their careers while raising their children. As a result, women's capacity to balance their personal goals becomes a prerequisite for their careers and employment. This situation perpetuates larger systemic injustices that can hinder women's long-term career advancement and financial autonomy, especially in fields like tour guiding that require physical presence and flexibility in scheduling.

FTG 01, who is unmarried, shared her different perspective on the future of her family and career. She revealed her interest in not getting married anytime soon, and if she did, she would quit working in this sector. One reason is that sometimes guides in the tourism sector have to work every day of the week and month due to heavy work demands and continuing such work would not be appropriate for them after marriage. Even though she may not have to perform a role like other married women, she does not want to continue working as a guide after her marriage. Consequently, she is trying to give a hint to continue her other (side) occupation due to the socially constructed gender norms, such as women giving priority to their family and not being far from home after marriage. She elaborated on how her occupational role contradicted societal gender norms.

"I have worked as a female tour guide for many years and gained many things. However, now I have decided not to continue guiding work. I think now it is time to think about my married life. No one will accept a lady who is always away from home."(FTG 01)

Primarily, this shift is motivated by the desire to conform to the socially accepted role of a wife and woman (Jayaweera, 2024). She elaborated on how her occupational role contradicted societal gender norms. The responsibilities of men and women are meant to be equal, but that is not the case in Nepal. It happens only in Western societies, but in a conservative society like Nepal, women, mainly from rural areas, have to live in compromise if they choose to live independently. Women's perception of gender came as one factor responsible for remaining within the social

norms and creating homes for their families. Men, on the other hand, can be seen as strong and controlling figures. Obeying a husband or males in the family is seen as respect that women tend to generate, and from what they stated, they appeared satisfied.

The testimonies of female trekking guides in Nepal also reveal how deeply entrenched gender norms and stereotypes are in society and within the family to shape women's access to non-traditional occupations. One guide recount, *"The very first barrier in this occupation came from my own family. My mother was not happy at all... Most of the people think this job is not suitable for females"* (FTG-04), highlighting the role of family and expectations of society in discouraging women from entering the male-dominated trekking field in tourism. This perception reflects a broader societal belief that women should prioritize the view of family, down-to-earthiness, humbleness, and domestic roles over independence and public-facing work, particularly in physically demanding or mobility-intensive professions.

Another guide states, *"The first myth is that 'khaires' (foreigners) are not good. My family disapproved of me, while two uncles of mine also worked in the same field"* (FTG-02).

The above statement points to the cultural stigma surrounding women's interaction with outsiders. This double-standard stigma, where male relatives or family members are permitted to work with foreigners while women are morally looked over, illustrates how gendered moral expectations are enforced through family structures and societal boundaries. Together, these accounts underscore how gender stereotypes and the function of family control create significant barriers for women, reinforcing a gendered division of labor and limiting female autonomy within Nepal's trekking sector.

Patriarchal norms and values still exist in Nepal (KC, 2013). Even if women are allowed to work, they are encouraged to be in sectors such as teaching and nursing (Hillman, 2019). Working in the sector as a female guide is viewed negatively. For example, people and society say, this woman works outside, away from her home and family; she must stay overnight somewhere or with someone, or maybe she is impure, and society begins to think negatively. One respondent recalls her memory of when we asked about gender.

“While my team and I were trekking together a few years ago, some male guides teased and insulted me, saying, this is a man’s job; why are you in this job? You are quite educated, and you can do other work, like being a teacher”. (FTG-05)

The third participant recalls her memory while asking questions about gender norms. *“I have suffered many times due to this struggle in tourism. Many men try to say things like, ‘I will give you work and recommend you, let’s enjoy together,’ and similar comments. Also, during treks, some male guides are not comfortable with female guides because they think women are not doing as much as they are. Men are considered perfect for trekking, not women. Indirectly, they show such behavior like laughing in the face and gossiping in the back” (FTG-03).*

Very few people in Nepal believe women must participate in the outdoor industry. Especially society, family, and male guides think females are sensitive and physically too weak to be adventure guides (Kabil et al., 2022). The above statement by (FTG-05) shows how social perceptions of women and professional capability intersect to create barriers for women, which limit their career possibilities and opportunities and undermine their contributions in non-traditional fields, establishing gender biases and occupational stereotyping that are common in male-dominated industries like trekking and adventure tourism. Also, the male guides' dismissive remarks directed at the female guide call into question her professional legitimacy and reinforce the idea that specific jobs are inherently male-oriented by suggesting alternative roles deemed more appropriate for her gender.

Tourism and travel, especially in challenging terrains like the Himalayan region, are often perceived as physically demanding and male-dominated. However, one respondent shared her incident that shows women are not only limited to dominant or home roles but also can contribute meaningfully in supportive, caregiving, and emotionally resilient roles in fields like guiding.

“In particular, I remember an incident where a woman had health problems. It was in the year 2078 B.S. (2021 A.D.). She was a 72-year-old mother from the Netherlands. She had to undertake a 42-day journey, starting from Sikkim, passing through Panchthar, Taplejung, Solukhumbu, Lukla, and finally reaching Bigu Gumba in Dolakha. She had problems with her knees, which

made it difficult for her to walk. Later, she also suffered from diarrhea. She was the kind of person who enjoyed eating local food wherever we went. We thought the local food might have caused the diarrhea. We also could not find any places to help her, like a health post. I gave her medicine and somehow helped her in other ways, and she recovered. We completed our journey successfully. Perhaps because of that, she still remembers me. She sends me emails and SMS messages during all her events. As a trekking guide, along with being professional, you also form emotional bonds with foreigners" (FTG-03).

The statement by FTG 03 highlights that females are not confined to dominant and homemaking roles alone, nor are they passive participants. Instead, they can engage with equal courage and commitment, often displaying emotional intelligence and cultural sensitivity, essential in trekking, exchanging cultures, and interpersonal engagement. In addition, the relationship between the guest and the female guide shows another layer of gendered contribution. The ability of female guides to provide medical assistance, emotional support, and logistical help reflects the nurturing and empathetic aspects of fieldwork. These roles are often under-acknowledged but essential. This narrative also challenges the narrow framing of gender roles by illustrating that the contribution of females in field settings is holistic: as problem solvers, deep connectors, and cultural bridges. Their participation expands the definition of what strength and leadership encompass, qualities such as resilience, caring, adaptability, relational depth, and physical domination. Therefore, this incident illustrates that women's contributions, even if they take unconventional forms, are essential to the larger framework of gender roles in field-based occupations like guiding.

4.2.2 Work-life unbalance

Work-life balance is a situation where an individual's work and personal life are balanced with each other (Gupta,2021). Work-life balance in our thesis is reflected more in personal and professional roles, such as mother and father. There are different challenges to maintaining work-life balance, and these challenges are mainly for women as they play a dual role in managing the family household and professional duties (Wang & Xu, 2018). A job like touring and trekking requires a longer time away from home. Sometimes, it may take more than a month to finish a trek. So, work-life imbalance was mentioned by most of our female guide participants when asked about it, and it emerged regularly.

Females, especially mothers, are the backbone of the family, and they feel guilty when they are not around when the children are growing up or when the children need their mothers. This thing could be overwhelming for some mothers, which also gives rise to self-blame. It is also known as maternal guilt and is present among many mothers (Rotkirch & Janhunen,2010). One respondent presents mother guilt as:

"I had missed many special moments like when my son and daughter got the trophy in their school games; I was not there, and there are many more. I wish I were there. I miss talking to them" (FTG-03)

Even though the child was being cared for by their father or another family member, or perhaps the children were not much concerned or worried about the mother's absence, the mother has been missing many events of the child's life, which were significant for her. It is seen as common in many cases of working mothers. Therefore, maternal consciousness is present in the case of a female trekker, and she expresses it during the interview. This is not just the case for female trekkers but is also present in most working mothers worldwide. A study shows that the number of hours a mother works is significantly related to her perceived guilt (Alemada, 2019). When females have families and mostly children, they do not feel that work is more important in their lives than their children. The mother goes to work with the guilt that she cannot be there when her child is the one who needs her most. This blame also comes as the female thinks she is pursuing her career and thinking about herself more than her children. Even though the father is very supportive and caring, the mother feels she is the most important part of their life, which makes her more conscious (Rotkirch & Janhunen,2010).

Moreover, trekking demands being away from home for an extended period, as a trip can last days, weeks, or even more. Being away from home causes some females to worry more, not about themselves but about family and children. The worry about family is stated briefly by the second respondent:

"Sometimes there is no network. I miss talking to my children. Sometimes I get worried if they are all right.... so, I will call them as soon as I get the network." (FTG-02)

Her concerns are due to network or communication issues in Nepal's mountainous region. She admits that she worries when she cannot communicate with her family and children without a mobile network. According to female guides, there is undoubtedly a communication issue when people are at a high altitude. When the hikers reach a high altitude, there are no communication facilities. Internet connection and other telecommunication facilities are still not functioning fully in Nepal, especially at high altitudes. There is undoubtedly an increase in communication technologies like the internet in Nepal due to different efforts from the private and public sectors. However, it is still not fully developed compared to the developed world. The increase in technology has also benefited the tourism sector in Nepal and provided communication channels for high-altitude trekkers (Shrestha et al., 2021). Though the situation is improving, there is limited coverage, leaving the trekkers disconnected from the world in some parts of the journey. This is a similar situation faced by the interview participants, which disrupted their family's communication, further causing worries.

There has been a recent emergence of working women in Nepal. Not long ago, Nepalese women were more involved in household activities as full-time moms (Sharma, 2000). The participants may have felt deviated from the role of being a full-time mother. Full-time mothers are still prevalent in Nepal's society and culture and may have been idealized as perfect mothers (Prakash et al., 2011). They may have believed themselves to be incompetent in comparison to other mothers. That is why they were trying to compensate by spending their time after work with their children. The compensation may provide quality family time when they are together but leaves no self-care time for the women. *"So, when I am around, I try to give them more time to be with them and talk to them. I feel guilty."* (FTG-04)

Therefore, Women with families, especially those who have children, may feel guilty when they spend more time away from home. They might find it challenging to manage this pressure. Consequently, they may attempt to compensate for it in other ways. The case may differ if the family does not support single and married women, as being a tour guide is not a respected job in Nepal, as explained in the literature above.

Though the income per tour is equal and high as per participants, the nature of the job is seasonal, irregular, and challenging, especially regarding the time the tourists arrive and the chance of getting the job. Respondent said, *"This is not my only job. I work in the government, and that is my full-time job. But I have taken two months' holiday to work as a tour guide. It is like freelancing, but the income is good "(FTG-01).*

Despite being vital to the trekking and tourism industry, the work of trekking guides is characterized by a high level of labor precarity, especially for females. In many parts of the world, guiding, particularly in trekking and outdoor tourism—remains a male-dominated profession, and women must contend with both the job's economic instability and deeply ingrained gender conventions (Russen et al., 2020). The occupation of guiding is highly seasonal, and income is centered only in the peak trekking seasons. This means females trekking mostly get a job only for a few months, and they must spend 8 months of their life without a job if they do not have any additional job options. When the trekking season ends, they may often find themselves without alternative employment, yet still responsible for sustaining their child and families. The irregular nature of employment makes engaging in consistent jobs or long-term planning challenging, leading to frustration and emotional strain. This tension, which stems from both economic precarity and entrenched gender norms, affects women's motivation to remain in the guiding profession in the long run.

Female guides may feel discouraged and demoralized by the uncertainty of financial support and the lack of institutional support and social recognition for their dual roles as income earners and caregivers. One participant who has children expresses it differently. She sees no support from the government regarding childcare and policies. She shows some frustration about the support from the government. She says:

"It's the job I chose, but I feel the job is affecting my whole family. When I am away, my in-laws come to care for my child, so their lives are also somehow affected. I would not have imagined doing this without them." (FTG-04)

Childcare is an important factor that prevents women from keeping their positions in the labor market. The participant does not see the possibility of being employed if the grandparents cannot

take responsibility when she is away from home, which reflects that there is no governmental support for families in the case of childcare. Thus, providing childcare can help parents, predominantly females, to continue their work.

In many developing countries, the government does not provide childcare. This is also why many women drop out of the labor market after getting a job, as they take on household chores and care for children and families. Also, when analyzed through the lens of intersectionality, the strain is exacerbated for women from lower-income and rural households, who frequently do not have access to supportive partners or domestic assistance. A deeply ingrained structural imbalance in the value and segregation of labor according to gender and class is exemplified by this dual expectation. In the case of a female trekking guide, childcare is essential. They need tremendous support to focus when they are away and concentrate on their journey. The lack of childcare support can cause women to withhold job offers on many occasions. Moreover, if they fail to organize secure childcare during peak season, it can deprive them of income for the whole year, challenging their household income management. Further, she says:

"What after I can no longer go to work? I do not have any pension scheme, though I have some personal savings. I do not know if my savings will be enough for the future, but I am happy that at least my children will attend a good school now." (FTG-03)

One respondent showed concern about future financial security. As she also stated, the job of a trekking guide is freelancing, so there is no financial security in the future. The job is an earning of the present, and individuals should plan their financial future. In Nepal, the pension scheme is provided only for government jobs (Paudel, 2016), and employees must secure their future with personal savings. So, there is a dilemma: whether the trekker works more hours to save more for retirement or if they should focus on the present. This vulnerability could lead to adverse effects on the mental health of employees.

Overall, work-life imbalance causes consequences for the employees, their performance, and the employer. Trekking guides or travel is very demanding and gaining a work-life balance could be more complicated than any other full-time job. Time away from family, missing important family

events, lack of childcare, communication problems with family during tours, job insecurity, and lack of support from the government were a few issues mentioned by the participants. Overcoming these factors could be one of the factors that enable female trekkers to feel a work-life balance. However, as they have a long time away from their family, having a total work-life balance among trekkers may be challenging.

4.2.3 Bullying and Harassment

The forms of bullying that female tour guides reported were calling names in Nepali, such as "uttaulo keti" (flirtatious girl), "sexy," and "lady heroine" (a sexualized term referring to a film heroine with over confidence attitude). When we asked our female guides about bullying and gender issues, most of them revealed that they were bullied at some point. Surprisingly, most bullies were from their male colleagues and family relatives rather than strangers.

According to one respondent, "I get very frustrated, especially when I get repeated comments from my relatives, male colleagues, sometimes from other company's male guides. They say you look like a sexy heroine in Nepal, which is good enough for tourists. They laugh sarcastically and tease me like I am dating a tourist. We do not flirt or anything. We just work as assigned by the agencies. Sometimes, they even make me cry, and I wish they had someone from their family, some girl, who worked in the same field. When they tease me, it just spoils my whole day, and I go to work in a bad mood. Every day, I have to challenge myself to sneak out as early as I can so that my relatives or neighbors do not see me and start gossiping. Sometimes I feel like quitting this job, but for us, no place is free from bullies "(FTG-02).

The socio-cultural status of Nepal and the lack of awareness, knowledge, and education about females working in the tourism field make many people criticize females who work as trekking or tour guides. The practice of creating and generalizing false assumptions is very prevalent (Hutchings et al., 2020). For example, even in the city areas, if any woman is seen with a man, just having a conversation, or drinking coffee or tea somewhere, people give them names as a couple without realizing they could be friends, relatives, or someone else. The fact that a lady in the back of the motorbike has to be the man's wife or girlfriend is a prevalent mindset. So, this type of practice and generalizations are common in Nepali society, and tourism has not remained an exception (KC, 2013).

Another negative behavior related to female tour guides is bullying, which includes verbal and sexual harassment, as one of them faces with their client while trekking. She suffered sexual harassment from one of the tourists from America while on the Solukhumbu trek tour. She stated that the harasser (client) was talking about "very nonsense and sexual things" with her, and even sometimes the harasser "kept very close" and "touched her." As she narrated the situation:

"My client asked me: Do you have any special service for me? He always talked about embarrassing sexual things to me, which annoyed me. When I was working, he always stood very close to me, and sometimes he even touched me and used to say things sarcastically". (FTG-05)

Respondent 01 also recalled her harassment memory as "I was 21 when I became a guide. I've never been raped, thank God, but I had to go through a horrible situation once. It was sort of expected that I'd just deal in a male-dominated sector. One night, I think it was in April, I was at a camp on a mountain with one male tourist. We were in the middle of a huge snowstorm, and the rest of my team members were somewhere else, so we were alone. He'd hinted to me with a physical expression of gratitude, but I somehow saved myself from that situation". (FTG-01)

Several informants experienced unwanted attention, which can be categorized as sexual harassment (Alrawadieh et al., 2021). Here, the tourists' offensive comments and physical attacks demonstrate how the commodification of service labor and patriarchal entitlement come together, often believing that female workers' mental and even sexual availability is a component of their services. Moreover, the first participant (FTG 01) incident recounts her being separated from her team and alone with a male tourist during a snowstorm, emphasizing how vulnerability is increased by physical isolation. The tourist's apparent expressions of "gratitude" refer to nonverbal sexual attempts, which are particularly dangerous when help is far away.

However, the married interviewees also reveal that the propensity of being a victim of harassment may also depend on several factors, including marital status, work environment, work experience, and whether the guides work on a freelance or a salary basis. Two married guides and those who had considerable work experience were less likely to experience sexual harassment. For instance, FTG 03 mentioned, *"I did not experience much harassment. I attribute this to the fact that I am*

married; it might be different if I am divorced or single. I have rarely experienced". Previous research (Hutchings et al., 2020) also indicated that younger employees are most likely to experience sexual harassment. However, experiencing sexual harassment can be traumatic and thus may have detrimental impacts on the well-being of victim employees for the rest of their lives.

Many female tour guides do not want to continue their job for a longer time due to this kind of Bullying and harassment in this sector. According to the participants, many females even refuse to go on tours or trek if it is for a longer trip. Only a few females who are very vocal about these things go on an extended tour. They (female guides) see these types of harmful and unethical behaviors in tourism, but they are not sure how many women among them are responding to these things. Some females feel comfortable dealing with quiet people. However, others cannot because the tour job itself has a saying that the guide must respond according to the guest(tourist), as it is a guide's responsibility to make a client happy, and the customer is always right (FTG 01,02,04).

Sexual harassment is a widespread concern and has achieved popularity in contemporary times (Díaz-Meneses et al., 2020) due to the many factors relating to more extended working periods, evening shifts, the pervasiveness of alcohol, and the familiarity of 'hospitality service', the hospitality/tourism trade is exceptionally vulnerable to the enigma of sexual harassment (Hutchings et al., 2020). There is a prevailing male bias in tourism research where no benefits are made for gender differences as a result of a gender bias that subsumes female behavior into that of the dominant male pattern. Additionally, research into female tourism has consistently shown that females are more powerfully and heavily controlled than males in pursuing admission to leisure, sport, and tourism activities (Hutchings et al., 2020). Thus, limitations seem amplified for females when they participate in pursuits outside the domestic sphere or in the open because of concerns regarding harassment from males (Hillman, 2019).

When interviewed about situations and treatment regarding male trekking guides, they have the following recounts. The male guides joke with us, saying, *"You are not like us. This sector does not belong to you. Now, things are slowly changing. Male guides usually dominate us by kidding us. If any female guide makes any mistake while on a trip or faces any small problems, male guides*

repeatedly say it again and again. They only target females, but I know females are as good as they are "(FTG-04).

Our second female guide also presented an example, as she lives in Pokhara. She said, " If a male guide does anything wrong with tourists or any females, they make a plan to destroy that mistake within themselves, but if anything happens by a female guide, the news is spread all over the village" (FTG-02).

Here, both females present how informal networks protect social inequalities like men, while women are exposed to public shaming and blaming. These things may create a hostile work environment where women can limit access to mentorship or withdraw from opportunities. Surprisingly, another female guide presented a new fact about how they must adjust when their Nepalese guide makes them uncomfortable during travel.

"Sometimes in a season, if we do not get a room in certain crowded places, and at that time, we do not have an option, we should sleep with other guides in the dining area as a team. I sometimes felt scared and not safe at that time. Similarly, sometimes I can get a room, but I do not feel comfortable sleeping in the same room with a male guide. Some guides are good in manner, and sometimes Nepalese male guides discriminate against Nepalese women's guides, making me nervous" (FTG -05).

Together with feminist travel researchers, tourism and geographers have perceived gender imbalances in the ways males and females utilize, understand, and gain admission to the public (Russen et al., 2020). This type of gendered body of research purports that women feel more limited in their freedom to use public space, particularly because of a perception of fear regarding potential violent or sexual attacks at the hands of unknown people. Also, most tourism jobs are seasonal; hence, most employees are temporary workers, so workers are not motivated to fight against harassment for long-term solutions or to seek the help of employers (Russen et al., 2020). Especially in this field, the regulations are very unclear. It lacks a policy that the female guides must be understood by the company, and the country's rules should support females if they feel uncomfortable (Cheung et al., 2017). Consideration and communication need to be done between the company and its guides. Giving female tour guides a different option, like if you are not feeling

good, there must be a solution, and policies should be internal, so the guide feels safe if they feel unsafe.

4.2.4 Menstrual health and sanitation challenges

Sanitation remains a significant challenge for female travelers and female guides while traveling (Bauer et al., 2021). Sometimes, visitors also will not come across public health care and toilets for long journeys to many places in Nepal. And even if they do, they are unsure whether they want to use them. Thus, if any females are on a period while traveling, using a dirty public toilet and lack of health facilities when needed can become a significant hassle. So, the only way to tackle or minimize the hygiene problem is to carry hygiene washes and feminine wipes (Bauer et al., 2021).

Regarding female hygiene issues, most female guides state that the major problem they must face during trekking is during the menstrual cycle at a high altitude. Menstruation issues are among the health concerns that go beyond the typical physical demands of trekking in the particular settings of female trekking guides (Christopher & Miller, 2007). Most of the time, women's cycles change; sometimes, females get more cramps due to extreme cold. Changing sanitary pads every two hours while hiking is complex and locating the public toilets on the way is challenging. The most difficult part of the trekking has been menstrual hygiene. As it is challenging to find separate rooms during peak season, everyone should share dining halls, which leads to awkwardness.

"Women's health has a slightly different context. Menstruation cannot be ignored in this regard. During my period, I experience intense abdominal pain. I try to endure it as much as I can, but if I'm going to be guided at the time, I have to take pain relief medicine. We walk a lot, and we never know exactly where or when we'll arrive somewhere. That's why I always carry both menstrual hygiene products and painkillers with me" (FTG-03).

The above statement emphasizes how crucial it is to manage menstrual health as an integral component of preparedness for a female guide. In contrast to their male colleagues, female guides need to bring painkillers and menstrual hygiene items in addition to the usual trekking equipment in order to handle the discomfort associated with their periods while on treks. This reveals the important logistical as well as physical difficulties faced by female guides in isolated and difficult settings with limited access to sanitary facilities and medical treatment (Kokkranikal et al., 2024).

To ensure the performance and well-being of women in this field, it is imperative to recognize and attend to these particular demands.

Women are mostly prone to UTIs and yeast infections (Bauer, 2021). One respondent recalled her incident about infections here,

"When we reach high mountain regions or base camps, it becomes difficult to change pads. So, during menstruation, I prefer using a menstrual cup instead of pads. Sometimes, I use tampons. Once, I was leading a group of 12–13 people from Poland to Everest Base Camp. That happened to be during my period, and I had inserted a tampon. Later, I completely forgot to remove it. I only remembered and took it out three days after my period had ended. I ignored my health in the cold and while constantly chatting with people. After returning to Kathmandu, I went to Civil Hospital. I had developed an infection. Nothing showed up on the video X-ray, but the doctor prescribed me medicine" (FTG-04).

Here, the narrative from Participant 04 illustrates the complex challenges of managing menstruation while in high-altitude mountains during a trek, especially for females in leadership roles. It also describes a situation during a trek to Everest Base Camp in Nepal, where limited access to sanitation facilities made changing pads impractical. Further, most females cannot access clean toilets, water, sanitary cloths/ pads/ tampons, or the needed private places to change or dispose of menstrual hygiene materials in high-altitude areas.

Surprisingly, another participant expressed social and cultural beliefs that made them hesitate to share their difficult days with their team members during the trek, which we did not expect as it often happens in the field of tour and trek Guiding.

"Sometimes I feel like I'm not energetic. Even though I wanted to share that I'm on period, I cannot because of hesitation like cultural belief" (FTG-02).

Instead of accepting menstruation as a natural biological process, menstruation is associated with restrictions, shame, and superstitious beliefs that make hesitation to share their pain with others in Eastern societies. Specifically in Hindu communities, menstruation is taught to suffer in silence; many restrictions, such as not allowing for cooking, entering a Hindu temple, having sex, or

touching particular objects that belong to men. Through the lens of gender roles theory, the above statement also reflects how femininity is socially built around ideas of privacy, resilience, and simplicity, particularly in public and professional settings. These expectations are internalized by female guides, who frequently suppress their demands to prevent being perceived as unprofessional or weak. This kind of self-silencing affects their physical as well as mental well-being of female's ability to function at work.

When asking respondent-02 further after her hesitation about the menstruation myth, she responded,

"I was born in a rural and low-income family in Nepal. Until today, I have witnessed a variety of practices related to menstruation since I was a child while my mother, aunt, and sisters were on their periods. They followed many restrictions related to what menstruating women can eat, see, touch, or participate in events. I was traumatized from seeing all of these nonsense restrictions. Several times, I have had the opportunity to witness an annual cleansing ritual called "Rishi Panchami" (one of the annual Hindu festivals for purifying the contamination of body caused by menstruation throughout the year, and most females have to perform the purification ritual). Seeing my sisters put in a shed during their first and second periods was painful. So, I became determined to deny these restrictions at any cost. I have not followed any of these restrictions since I got my period at the age of 14" (FTG-02).

Within Hindu religious practice, the period is commonly accepted as 'defiling,' 'impure,' and 'unsuited' for worship, and these rules fall to women. The personal experience of the female guide here highlights the deep-rooted cultural norms and menstruation restrictions that a lot of females still face in Nepal, particularly in rural areas. The idea that women's bodies are essentially inferior and polluted is reinforced by the social and cultural expectations, which socialize girls into passivity and shame, according to gender role theory (Ochsenfeld, 2014). But a radical act, the participant's rejection of these rituals shows her physical independence by refusing to follow a gendered script. And, the ability to critically examine one's social situation and act against restrictive social norms is a great example of individual psychological empowerment from the standpoint of empowerment theory. She demonstrates her independence by refusing to follow monthly restrictions or engage in rituals like Rishi Panchami, indicating a change from internalized oppression to conscious resistance. This type of initial resistance provides the groundwork for a

lifetime practice of challenging cultural, religious, and patriarchal boundaries for many women, particularly those pursuing non-traditional careers like tour guiding.

Women must fight for their right to be seen, heard, and taken seriously in the tour guiding industry, which is often considered a male-dominated field because of its demands for mobility, assertiveness, and public engagement. Traditional gender norms that restrict women to the home and private sphere are aggressively challenged by their presence here. Therefore, female tour guides need to cross social boundaries and regain their voice and agency in the public sphere, going beyond simply navigating physical areas. This visibility fosters a form of empowerment where change occurs both inside and externally. On the inside, these women gain self-assurance, independence, and a reframed self-image that transcends cultural boundaries. On the outside, they refuse social conventions, influencing younger generations and igniting changes in public opinion. They represent change, not just for themselves but also for the larger society that starts to rethink the roles and potential of women.

4.2.5 Safety and Physical Risk

Trekking is a significant adventure in Nepal's tourism sphere. Trekking is perceived as an average to low-hazard pursuit involving some risk. Risk, as described by Hillman and Radell (2019), is a unique, collective, and adaptive explanation of contemporary reality. Weather circumstances mainly determine risk in the context of affecting trekking guides and include rock and ice collapses, landslides, and sudden weather fluctuations. What frequently stays overlooked, though, is the reality that those districts are by and large harsh spaces, where extreme rock-strewn, frozen, and glacial landscapes with inadequate ease of access and variable risks of landslides, tumbling rocks, and snow are intensified by harsh low oxygen levels and freezing environments (Shengxiang She et al., 2019). However, these physical hazards are not only a part of the work for female trekking guides; they also act as career obstacles that affect their ability to enter and stay in the field. Women are disproportionately affected by the difficult conditions found in isolated trekking routes as well as the absence of institutional support like safety gear, rescue services, or specialist training. These hazards interact with gendered views of physical competence, family safety concerns, and restricted access to remote or higher-paying jobs. As a result, many women are either hindered from seeking guiding positions in trekking tourism or are limited to less dangerous and lucrative options.

With this, one participant said, *"It was a terrible and scary situation. Ice and rocks were falling. 2 years ago, everybody canceled their trip, but my clients did not want to cancel, so we continued and stopped the next day by losing our way. Clients want to go despite some risks, but we must be responsible to overcome the worst situation "(FTG-04).*

The statement emphasizes how female guides frequently have to make tough decisions while dealing with severe weather, as they bear the burden of ensuring both tourist satisfaction and safety. The expectations placed on female guides to demonstrate their abilities in dangerous situations exacerbate this duty and may deter women from pursuing careers in the area.

And yet another participant said:

"I went with American women on a trek in December 2022. Frozen water was coming from the mountain, and we could finally cross the river. We took off our shoes and socks to cross the river then. I saw that my guest was a little bit numb after crossing the river. She asked me to wear warm clothes so that I could feel good and walk. But at the same time, she felt so bad. She walked for almost 2 hours with difficulty. We stayed somewhere the whole night on that day. And the next day, I saw that she turned blue. It was a rural area, so the place was inaccessible by transport or phone connection. It was difficult for me. Finally, we got a horse to go, but it's a very challenging job" (FTG-02).

This experience illustrates how difficult trekking routes may be both physically and logistically. Women have additional emotional and safety challenges while dealing with such crises in remote areas with little to no institutional help. These encounters may discourage women from pursuing this kind of work and restrict the number of female guides who take on isolated or high-altitude hiking tasks.

Tour and trekking experiences not only offer an extensive choice of natural, cultural, and spiritual advantages but also involve some kinds of risk and safety issues during traveling sometimes (Reisinger & Mavondo, 2005). It is also well-known that tourism, like trekking, especially in areas with limited space like the high mountains, involves specific threats to the natural environment. Also, the remote part of Nepal is underdeveloped. Poor infrastructure, low-quality roads, and poor availability are prominent. Moreover, unreliable domestic air services are uncommon (Jones,

2013). While these risks affect all guides, female trekking guides are particularly vulnerable, as they are sometimes subjected to more questioning about their physical toughness and security. Employers and families may be unwilling to assist women working in such uncertain settings, and the lack of reliable support can increase the perceived and actual risks for women working alone or with little assistance.

Indeed, when asked questions about what types of risk and safety issues, two of our participants had this to say,

"Landslides and bad weather conditions are the common risks while trekking in the rainy season. When I went trekking last year in Annapurna during the rainy season. There were landslides, and we needed to be very careful. Roads got blocked too "(FTG-01).

"Landslides and floods are major risks (in trekking, not only the landslides but also floods are major risks; acute mountain sickness, snowfall in trekking, and climbing are the high-risk factors). Porters are the worst affected, and sometimes we are too. I think this is due to the lack of safety orientation and may happen to anyone. We need to do it in the morning when you want to make high passes. In the rainy season, there are risks with landslides and floods" (FTG-05).

The trekking guides believe that extreme snowstorms activate rock falls, which trigger damage to individuals and possessions in conjunction with the destruction of paths and tracks in trekking areas. The occurrence of unpredictable weather, such as rainstorms and blizzards, directly affects the trekkers and trekking guides. These tragedies devastate the transport structure, triggering obstruction of thoroughfares, trekking trails, and mountaineering paths, disconnecting the supply chain to mountain settlements, destroying cultivated pastures, and polluting water supplies, which have adverse consequences for trekking and tourism-based operations and income. The outcomes of risk or major hazards experienced by trekking guides are important things that some participants in the research revealed:

"I want the government to do something for the families who lost their relatives during mountaineering or trekking" (FTG-03).

"Even if we face some problems, there is no helpline. Isn't it the responsibility of the government or any other organization to provide safety? Should it be the government's responsibility to whom we pay much tax? "(FTG-02)

The importance of this issue correlates with welfare societies and operators delivering social services. Welfare is mainly given using personal arrangements. The impact of this topic relates to the demise of Nepali residents employed as trekkers, but the adverse effects of this occasion remain on the family and relatives. The area of this research also identifies the reality that the bulk of fatalities transpiring at elevated heights are Nepali people and not foreign trekkers (Lundqvist, 2015). Some organizations should be responsible for ensuring that female trekkers do not face such difficulties alone. In addition, the government should also participate in such situations for policy formulation, reforms, and implementation. However, a lack of this support can lower the motivation of the employee as well as a lack of security during the travel

Another participant added that:

"Nowadays, few rescue associations and facilities exist, but there are not enough. Big companies need to give more training to guides about safety and security "(FTG-01).

It shows a severe lack of institutional support and readiness in the travel and tourism sector, especially for field-based occupations like tour guiding from the structural inequality perspective. This issue highlights a systematic failure to provide sufficient resources and infrastructure for emergency response, particularly in remote or dangerous tourist areas. The few rescue associations highlight a general lack of emphasis on safety in the public and private fields. Also, from a structural inequality perspective, inadequate resources, infrastructure, and safety training expose how female guides—already marginalized in a male-dominated field—are further disadvantaged by the lack of protective systems. These shortcomings place an unfair burden on guides, especially women who are expected to manage and deal with crises with limited resources or authority.

4.4 Empowerment

In Nepal's trekking and tourism industry, empowerment for women involves more than access to work; it means gaining the ability to manage their income, communicate confidently with clients, make independent choices, and challenge traditional beliefs that only men can lead in the mountains (Tajeddini, Ratten, & Denisa, 2017).

FTG-01 reflected that people initially doubted her abilities, saying, *"You are a woman, you cannot go alone in the mountains."* But over time, she earned respect: *"Now they say, 'you are brave, you*

have done this job, and you are capable.” This shift in perception illustrates the growing acceptance of women in leadership roles in trekking.

Empowerment also manifests through financial independence and personal confidence. FTG-01 emphasized that she no longer depends on others for money and decision-making. FTG-03 expressed pride in funding her children’s education and managing household expenses. FTG-05 shared similar feelings, noting that guiding enabled her to pay for school fees and daily needs, helping her gain self-confidence and autonomy.

Training plays a vital role in enabling empowerment. As FTG-02 stated, without initial training through organizations like Three Sisters and other programs, she would not have gained the skills or confidence needed to become a guide. Practical experiences and learning opportunities continue to build women's capabilities and confidence in the field.

Several guides emphasized how their journey influenced others. FTG-01 said other women were inspired by her story and began their own careers in guiding. This demonstrates the ripple effect described by Gurung and DeCoursey (1994), where one woman’s empowerment encourages broader social transformation.

Empowerment in this context is both socio-cultural and economic. The following sections explore each of these dimensions more deeply, focusing on how guiding has enabled women to gain respect in their communities, develop leadership, and build financial independence for themselves and their families.

4.4.1 Socio-Cultural Empowerment

In the context of women guides in Nepal, social empowerment refers to the development of confidence, voice, and the ability to take part in decision-making within their communities. It is about women gaining recognition for their work and expanding their role in social and public spheres.

FTG-02 reflected on the social transformation she has experienced since becoming a trekking guide: *"Now, I can teach others about my experiences as a guide."* She explained that community

members often seek her advice, which she shares based on over eight years of practical experience in the field as she said, *"Before, I could not even talk in a meeting, but now I am seen as someone with knowledge and experience,"* this illustrates a shift in how she is perceived socially and professionally. *"People listen to me and respect my opinion, and I feel valued for what I bring to the table,"* she added, highlighting her increased confidence and recognition in community spaces. Her narrative strongly reflects Kabeer's (1999) framework of empowerment, which stresses not only access to resources but also the agency to articulate one's views and participate in decision-making processes (Kabeer, 1999). Her experience highlights how her professional journey has given her not only the confidence to speak in public but also the recognition from others in her community.

FTG-03 acknowledged the challenges women face in the industry but also recognized the gradual shifts in societal attitudes: *"Some male guides still think women are not capable of doing this job, but I have seen that their views are slowly changing. They see us leading groups successfully, and they are beginning to understand that women can do this job just as well as men. It is not easy, but over time, people are accepting that we can be just as good, if not better, than male guides."* This statement reflects Pritchard et al. (2007), who argue that women in tourism challenge cultural expectations and redefine gender roles. Her experience underscores both the persistence of gender bias and the slow but ongoing transformation of perceptions about women's abilities in traditionally male-dominated fields.

FTG-04 also shared how her role has changed socially: *"When I started, I was not sure how people would react, but now I am proud of the work I do. People respect me in my community, and I'm happy to be a role model for others. My family and friends now see me as a capable and independent woman, and it feels good to know that I have gained their respect and trust."* This reflects the broader social empowerment that comes with professional success as women's work in tourism begins to reshape their status in their communities.

FTG-05 spoke about how her social role has evolved: *"Now I have grown confident, and I see people in my village looking to me for advice and guidance. I feel respected and valued for the work I do. I never imagined that I would be able to influence others in such a positive way, but*

now I see that my journey as a guide has made a real impact." Her statement highlights the growth of confidence and social recognition as key aspects of empowerment in the context of Nepal's trekking and tourism sector.

The experiences of both FTG-02, FTG-03, FTG-04, and FTG-05 illustrate that social empowerment for women guides is not limited to financial independence or leadership roles. It also includes the recognition of their skills, contributions, and voices in their communities and the tourism sector. As Cole (2006) emphasizes, social empowerment involves public recognition of women's capabilities, which leads to a broader shift in social norms. FTG-01 further spoke about this process: *"When I started, people did not think women could be guides. Now, after seeing my work and my success, more women are interested in joining, and even the men are starting to see us as equals. I feel proud that I have helped change people's minds about women in this field."* Her experience indicates how women are gradually changing their perceptions of what roles women can occupy in society and the workplace, breaking down long-standing gender barriers.

Organizations like Three Sisters Adventure Trekking have played a pivotal role in enabling women to pursue careers in trekking, an area historically dominated by men in Nepal (Simkhada, 2020). By offering training programs, mentorship, and safe employment opportunities, they have helped women build the confidence and skills needed to assume leadership and public-facing roles (Simkhada, 2020). As Gurung and DeCoursey (1994) explain, these types of grassroots initiatives have been essential in challenging traditional gender roles and making space for women to gain social visibility and professional credibility in tourism and guiding. In summary, social empowerment for women trekking guides extends beyond workplace recognition; it also includes being able to participate meaningfully in community life, influence others, and assert their presence in public spaces (Kabeer, 1999). It is also about challenging all those fixed societal norms and making significant contributions to changing public attitudes toward gender roles in Nepal's trekking and tourism industry. As these women continue to push the boundaries of what is socially acceptable, they are paving the way for future generations of women to enter, lead, and succeed in these fields.

4.4.2 Economic Empowerment

Economic empowerment refers to a woman's capacity to earn an income, manage her finances, and make informed decisions about economic matters that influence her life and well-being (Kabeer, 1999). In Nepal's trekking and tourism sector, where traditional gender norms often limit women's access to paid work, gaining financial independence represents a transformative step toward greater self-reliance and control (Tajeddini, Ratten, & Denisa, 2017). For many women working as trekking guides, being able to contribute economically to their households enhances not only their self-esteem but also their standing within their families and communities (Simkhada, 2020). It enables them to take control of their lives and challenge traditional gender roles within their families and communities.

FTG-01 spoke candidly about how entering the trekking profession changed her sense of independence: *"Earlier, I used to rely on my brothers or family for everything. But after becoming a guide, I started earning, and now I can support myself. It feels good to be able to take care of my needs without depending on anyone."* Her experience highlights how access to income-generating opportunities can directly contribute to a woman's autonomy and confidence (Kabeer, 1999). In Nepal's context, where women often face social and economic barriers, becoming financially self-reliant marks a significant step toward empowerment (Simkhada, 2020).

FTG-03 shared a similarly powerful experience about contributing financially to her family: *"My children are studying in Kathmandu, and I am the one who pays their fees. I also cover our household expenses when I'm working. This job has helped me take responsibility for my family. I feel proud to provide for them and make decisions about their future."* Her ability to fund her children's education and daily needs supports Chant's (2012) argument that economic participation allows women to influence household decisions and long-term planning, particularly in male-dominated societies.

However, economic empowerment through tourism is not without its vulnerabilities. FTG-03 acknowledged the seasonal nature of trekking work: *"We get work mostly in season, maybe four or five trips a year. Sometimes, there is nothing, and that makes things uncertain. It's hard to plan when we don't know how much we will earn."* This concern aligns with Ferguson's (2011) critique

that empowerment must include stability and reliable income sources to be truly transformative in women's lives.

Organizations such as Three Sisters Adventure Trekking and other NGOs have worked to address this gap by not only offering job placements and also teaching money management and promoting savings habits. FTG-02 explained, *"After joining training, I learned how to save money. I started keeping a record of what I earn and spend. Earlier, I didn't think much about that. Now, I understand how important it is to plan for the future."* This illustrates how training initiatives help expand women's financial literacy and long-term planning capabilities, which are essential components of empowerment.

Gurung and DeCoursey (1994) describe this process as a "circle of empowerment," where the success of one woman can lead to the upliftment of others in her community. FTG-01 affirmed this dynamic: *"When other women see me working, they ask how I started. I shared my story, and some even joined the training. That makes me happy because I know I've inspired others to take control of their lives."* Her experience demonstrates how economic empowerment can inspire everyone in her society to pursue similar paths, creating a positive cycle of change (Acharya, 2010). Such peer influence is essential in challenging traditional gender roles and increasing women's involvement in male-dominated sectors such as trekking and tourism (Scheyvens, 2000).

In addition to managing household finances, economic empowerment has encouraged women to think long-term. FTG-02 noted: *"I want to open a small training center in convenient places one day. Working with guests and these years of experience have given me confidence that I can do it. I know how to manage finances and plan for the future. I believe I can make this happen."* Her reflections highlight a move beyond day-to-day income generation, indicating a deeper sense of financial planning and independence shaped by sustained engagement in the trekking field (Tajeddini, Ratten, & Denisa, 2017).

FTG-05 emphasized how her long-term goals have changed since becoming a guide: *"When I first started, I was only thinking about making enough money to support my family. But now, I'm thinking about the future. I want to invest in a business, maybe a guesthouse. The job has given*

me the confidence to dream bigger." Her statement reflects a broader shift from survival-based thinking to entrepreneurial aspirations, which is increasingly evident among women in Nepal's tourism sector as they seek long-term economic autonomy (Tajeddini, Ratten, & Denisa, 2017).

Although the path toward financial stability remains uncertain due to the seasonal nature of trekking, the confidence and pride expressed by many women in supporting themselves speaks to the depth of their personal transformation (Upadhayaya, 2013). As FTG-03 concluded, *"Whatever little I earn, it is mine. That feeling is powerful. It pushes me to keep going, even when it's hard. I know I am the one who is in charge of my future."* Her words illustrate the emotional significance of ownership and control, reinforcing that empowerment is not just economic but deeply psychological as well (Kabeer, 1999).

The stories shared by women guides in Nepal reveal how tourism has become a meaningful way for them to gain not just income but also recognition and influence in their communities (Simkhada, 2020). By stepping into roles once seen as off-limits to women, they are gradually reshaping local attitudes about what women can achieve (Tajeddini, Ratten, & Denisa, 2017). Still, many guides face ongoing challenges, especially when work is inconsistent during off-peak seasons. Without stable income or long-term security, the path to lasting empowerment remains uncertain for many (Upadhayaya, 2013). However, persistent structural issues such as irregular employment and limited opportunities during the off-season continue to hinder the full realization of economic empowerment for many women in this field (Upadhayaya, 2013).

This research allowed the voices of women trekking guides to shape the understanding of empowerment from their lived experiences rather than from predetermined theories. Through their narratives, we observed that empowerment is multifaceted and rooted in personal transformation, growing confidence, and evolving community roles. The data revealed recurring themes: access to training, financial control, social recognition, and a desire for leadership. While financial independence was often the entry point, true empowerment extended to cultural acceptance, decision-making, and inspiring others. These women's journeys show that empowerment in Nepal's trekking sector is a dynamic process grounded in real experiences and continuously reshaped by those who live it.

4.5 Capacity Building

Capacity building is known as the process of developing an individual's skills, knowledge, and confidence to enable them to perform effectively and sustainably in their roles (UNDP, 2009). In the context of Nepal's trekking and tourism industry, it has emerged as a transformative force that empowers women to participate meaningfully in a field long dominated by men. Through training, education, and awareness, women are gaining tools to overcome social, economic, and cultural barriers while becoming capable leaders in their profession.

Historically, women in Nepal had limited access to professional training in trekking, a field long perceived as physically demanding and suited only for men (Tajeddini et al., 2017). This perception excluded many from roles requiring endurance, outdoor navigation, leadership, and client handling. However, the emergence of women-focused training initiatives has begun to challenge this norm. Programs led by organizations such as Three Sisters Adventure Trekking and Empowering Women of Nepal (EWN) offer comprehensive training in mountaineering techniques, first aid, foreign language communication, and group leadership (Hillman & Radel, 2022).

These initiatives have helped bridge the gender gap in technical competencies while supporting personal growth. *"Before I had any experience, I never thought I could become a guide,"* recalled FTG-01. *"I was scared to speak in front of people. But after learning and practicing over time, I became more confident, and now I can speak, lead, and even solve problems on the trail without hesitation."* Her words highlight how hands-on training has enabled women to navigate both the physical demands of trekking and the internal barriers of fear and self-doubt.

FTG-02 echoed a similar transformation: *"As a trekking guide, I have built confidence. I learned many languages, how to plan treks, and how to guide guests with care and responsibility. That changed my way of thinking. I saw myself as more than just a helper. I was a leader."* These reflections underscore how practical skill-building can promote autonomy and leadership among women in a traditionally male-dominated domain (Hillman & Radel, 2022).

Beyond technical skills, these programs are shifting perceptions at the community level. FTG-03 shared, *"After I finished the training, I realized I didn't just learn guiding skills; I learned that I*

could stand independently. I started earning, making decisions for myself, and helping my family without relying on anyone else.” This transformation is also visible to others. *“When I wear my trekking clothes and lead a group,”* she added, *“people in my village look at me with respect. They see that I am working hard, earning, and doing something special. It changes how they think about women.”* Such testimonies show how individual empowerment feeds into collective awareness, gradually challenging traditional gender expectations (Simkhada, 2020).

As more women enter the field, change is becoming more visible. *“When I first started, most people didn’t believe women could lead treks in the mountains,”* said FTG-01. *“But now, I see more women out here, leading groups and working with confidence.”* This shift reflects the impact of targeted efforts by organizations promoting gender equality in tourism, often supported by international agencies like the United Nations Development Programme (Tajeddini et al., 2017).

Capacity-building programs have also enabled women to grow beyond guiding roles. FTG-05 noted, *“The training gave me a solid foundation to grow as a guide. I had no idea about the terrain or how to manage tourists before. Now, I’m confident in my role, and I’m proud to guide groups on challenging treks.”* As more women become successful, they serve as mentors to others. FTG-02 explained, *“I saw other women becoming successful guides, and that gave me courage. Now, I try to help new girls who want to learn. I have even trained around 8–9 women. We are like a team; we support each other.”*

Education programs have played a vital role in increasing the number of qualified female guides. FTG-01 reflected, *“When I joined the training, I didn’t even know about the trekking routes. They also provided information about the geography and culture of Nepal. Now, I know a lot about different places, mountains, and cultures. It has opened up a whole new world for me.”* As Kilgour (2007) and Thapa (2013) suggest, inclusive training models that integrate technical and cultural knowledge empower women to participate more fully in Nepal’s tourism economy.

Nevertheless, challenges persist. Social norms and stigmas still deter many women. As FTG-02 observed, *“There’s still a lot of stigma around women working in trekking, but I see more and more women joining. There are other institutions in Pokhara like Malla Sisters, Empowering*

Women in Nepal (EWN), and more in Kathmandu, which help women train as tourist guides, which gives women hope for the future.”

Capacity-building initiatives in Nepal’s trekking sector have done more than teach guiding or safety skills—they have helped women reshape both their self-perception and the perception of others (Hillman & Radel, 2022). Training programs from organizations like Three Sisters Adventure Trekking and EWN have enabled women to step beyond domestic roles and into public decision-making spaces (Simkhada, 2020). For women like FTG-01 and FTG-03, structured training has led to technical empowerment, financial independence, and deeper community recognition. These efforts continue to open up new spaces for women in the trekking profession, challenging long-standing gender roles (Tajeddini et al., 2017).

4.5.1 Learning through Training

The opportunities for learning and training in the trekking sector are critical for the professional development of women trekking guides in Nepal. Institutions such as Empowering Women of Nepal (EWN) and Three Sisters Adventure Trekking have been instrumental in narrowing the gender gap in Nepal’s trekking sector by providing targeted training in areas like mountaineering, leadership, and client handling (Simkhada, 2020). Among these organizations, Three Sisters Trekking, Empowering Women in Nepal (EWN), and others play pivotal roles in offering educational programs that empower women to start and advance their careers in trekking and tourism.

Learning was one of the themes that emerged from the interviews in this research. The interviewees spoke about receiving instruction in areas such as training, education advancement, promotion, and progress. FTG-03, when asked whether the trainers talked about leadership, responded: *“Yes, they did.”* She added, *“I recall, when I was first in my office for training, I was very shy and reluctant to even say my name. Now things have changed a lot.”*

Another female guide stated: *“A lot. It includes topics like confidence building through empowerment, skill building, and development, and many more”* (FTG-02). Similarly, FTG-04 recalled: *“Yeah, we did. We knew about managing clients and leading clients. I learned to lead groups, how to speak with them, how to deal with the clients, and the challenges that we face while*

trekking. We need to speak English and learn the same. In addition, we learned about trekking routes, mountains, and cultures.”

FTG-01 reflected on her transformation: *“The training I received has made a huge difference. Initially, I was unsure about my role as a guide, but now I am more confident and equipped with the necessary skills. There are limited spots, and many people apply. You have to be committed. I’ve encouraged many people to enter this field. My brother is now a trekking guide because of my support. I also recommended the training to several friends.”* This example shows how empowerment can spread beyond individuals’ women who gain skills and confidence often become role models who inspire others to join the profession (Scheyvens, 2000). In addition to technical skills, many training programs focus on leadership development and self-empowerment, which are essential in a field like trekking that has long been dominated by men (Hillman & Radel, 2022).

FTG-05 explained: *“The training helped me develop leadership skills, which were crucial when I started leading groups. I learned how to manage people, solve problems, and ensure that my group had a safe and enjoyable experience. It was about more than just trekking; it was about taking charge.”* Her account shows that leadership training is not just an added benefit—it is central to women’s ability to manage real responsibilities in the field (Hillman & Radel, 2022). FTG-02 also recalled: *“During the training, I was taught to be a leader, to manage groups, and professionally deal with clients. This training changed my outlook, making me more confident in leading treks.”* Her experience illustrates how building confidence and leadership abilities is just as important as learning trekking routes or safety procedures (Thapa, 2013; Hillman & Radel, 2022).

Organizations such as Three Sisters Adventure Trekking have designed women-focused training that includes navigation, client relations, cultural awareness, and even sessions on personal safety and gender-based violence (Thapa, 2013). These programs offer more than technical training; they provide a space for women to challenge stereotypes and redefine their roles in a traditionally male-led profession (Hillman & Radel, 2022).

FTG-03, who has significant experience in the field, reflected on how her training empowered her to overcome societal barriers. Similarly, FTG-05 stated: *“Before the training, I was hesitant to*

step out into a public-facing role. But now, I am confident and ready to take on challenges, knowing I can handle them with the right skills.” As training participants become visible and capable figures in their communities, the programs begin to influence how society perceives women in outdoor leadership roles. This shift has been especially evident in regions where female participation in adventure tourism was once rare (Hillman & Radel, 2022).

Training institutions not only provide skills but also change perceptions within the community. FTG-04 shared: *“I can now handle tough treks, manage tourists, and lead groups. Initially, society didn’t think women could do this work, but I’ve proven that we can. I feel proud to show that women can lead and succeed in this field.”*

In addition to skills training, these programs also focus on the holistic development of female guides. FTG-05 added: *“The training opened my eyes to the importance of not just guiding tourists but ensuring their safety and well-being. I’ve learned to manage difficult situations, and that’s made me more confident as a guide.”* The role of organizations like Three Sisters Trekking and Empowering Women Nepal (EWN) in providing training and resources cannot be overstated. As Hillman and Radel (2021) assert, these initiatives are crucial in providing women with the tools and networks they need to overcome the structural and social barriers that have historically limited their participation in adventure tourism.

It is highly true that in the beginning, it is not very easy to break down the traditional concept of social values and go out for work. But through training, women can gain knowledge about the importance of being independent and learn about gender-based violence and other issues related to tours and trekking. One respondent stated: *“Silence will never help when you face violence or anything. You need to speak out and put your words against it immediately.”* She further added: *“Many times, we females internalize the violence happening to us, but because of fear of losing the job or reputation, many females may keep silent. Since I have learned about it during training, I am now confident to address the different situations and report them.”* These examples prove that learning through training is powerful and important for embracing and advancing the tourism industry.

Also, academic sources like Kilgour (2007) and Pung et al. (2022) stress the importance of educational programs in increasing the representation of women in leadership roles within the tourism and trekking sectors. Kilgour (2007) observes that the inclusion of women in outdoor sports and adventure tourism has been accompanied by the introduction of educational programs aimed at empowering women and providing them with the necessary tools to succeed. Similarly, Pung et al. (2022) argues that the increasing representation of women in leadership roles is partly due to such training opportunities.

4.5.2 Awareness and Changing Perception

Changing how society views women's roles in Nepal's trekking sector is essential to achieving both social and economic empowerment. While the field has historically been male-dominated, increased involvement by women supported by the initiatives of organizations like Empowering Women of Nepal (EWN) and Three Sisters, Trekking is slowly reshaping public perceptions and opening space for women's leadership in tourism (Hillman & Radel, 2022; Thapa, 2013). The interviews conducted for this study highlight how awareness programs and skill-based training have played significant roles in reshaping not only the self-perception of female guides but also the societal views surrounding women in the trekking sector.

FTG-04 described her early uncertainty about working as a guide: *"At first, I doubted myself because trekking is considered a man's job, and I worried about how others would see me. The training I received helped me overcome those fears. Now, I don't let negative opinions bother me, and I feel proud of what I do."* This illustrates how training programs support women not only in developing skills but also in confronting social stereotypes about their roles in trekking (Hillman & Radel, 2022).

FTG-05 shared how her experience changed attitudes around her: *"At the start, many people, including my own family, doubted that a woman could succeed as a trekking guide. However, after gaining skills and confidence through training, I earned their respect. Now, my family and community support my work fully."* This highlights how training programs help change social attitudes, fostering greater acceptance of women in trekking roles (Thapa, 2013). This transformation in her family's perception is a microcosm of the broader societal shift, where women's professional roles are being increasingly acknowledged, and gendered expectations are being questioned.

Organizations like Three Sisters Trekking and Empowering Women in Nepal (EWN) have been central to changing societal perceptions. These institutions provide women with the skills to thrive in the trekking industry while simultaneously addressing broader issues such as gender equality and women's rights. According to the Empowering Women in Nepal (n.d.) website, *"We focus on educating and empowering women to overcome societal barriers, providing them with the skills and knowledge to become leaders in the tourism and trekking sectors."* These programs not only equip women with technical expertise but also help shift cultural attitudes toward women's roles in adventure tourism, fostering a more inclusive environment.

Furthermore, as the number of women in leadership roles grows, public attitudes towards female guides are changing. FTG-03 shared, *"When I first started, many of my family members were skeptical about me working as a trekking guide, but now they are proud of what I've achieved. I've shown them that women can do this job just as well as men."* This shift in family support is indicative of the changing perceptions in society, where women's work is being valued more, and traditional gender roles are being challenged.

Research on women in adventure tourism supports the findings from the interviews. Hillman and Radel (2021) highlight that as women become more involved in outdoor activities, their presence in leadership roles is gradually breaking down long-standing gender stereotypes. Similarly, Kilgour (2007) discusses how the increasing involvement of women in outdoor adventure tourism challenges societal norms, proving that women can excel in fields previously dominated by men. Both studies demonstrate how women's participation in trekking is contributing to a broader shift in the landscape of adventure tourism, where women are now seen as capable leaders and professionals.

Training initiatives in Nepal also focus on important topics like gender-based violence (GBV) and advocating for women's rights within the workplace (Hillman & Radel, 2021). FTG-01 recalled: *"Learning about gender-based violence in training helped me understand my rights. Now, I feel more prepared to handle situations if they arise. It gave me the confidence to speak up for myself and other women if needed."* Education like this plays a key role in empowering female guides

individually and creating safer, more supportive workplaces. Training provides women with essential skills and understanding to defend their rights and handle difficulties within the male-dominated trekking industry (Thapa, 2013).

Using an inductive approach, this study explored how capacity building shapes the experiences of women trekking guides in Nepal. Interview insights showed that training programs not only provided technical skills but also built confidence, leadership, and the ability to challenge gender norms. Women who once felt shy or doubted by society gained the competence to lead treks and speak out against gender-based violence. These lived experiences revealed that capacity building through training and awareness does more than prepare women for the job it transforms how they see themselves and how society views women's roles in the trekking sector.

Chapter 5

Discussions

Though women's involvement in Nepal's tourism sector has gradually increased, our findings, interpreted through the lens of gender roles and empowerment theory—reveal persistent structural and cultural barriers. Gender roles continue to define societal expectations about women's physical and mental capabilities and professional suitability, particularly in male-dominated fields like trekking. However, regardless of these challenges, women have been utilizing the guiding sector as a means to improve their social status and achieve financial autonomy, as explained by empowerment theory. Female guides who pursued careers as trekking guides reported that they gradually gained acceptance from their family, relatives, and community, in addition to experiencing a sense of personal development and increased self-confidence. This study highlights how empowerment is not simply about economic gain but also involves navigating and transforming rigid gender expectations.

One of the main obstacles we identified through talking with participants was the prevailing belief that women are weaker and less capable due to their physical structure, which limits their ability to handle the demanding nature of trekking in the tourism field. The belief that men are inherently better suited as adventurers than females is deeply rooted in outdated gender norms (Costa et al., 2017) but is not an empirical and real fact. Historically, while men may have dominated the profession of guiding in the field of trekking, women are now equally capable when provided with equal opportunities, rights, possibilities, and institutional support. Thus, a clear shift in mindset, reinforced by some rules, policies, and representation, is necessary for achieving gender equity in this sector.

The gender roles entrenched in Nepali society are closely tied to the experiences of harassment and discrimination reported by female guides. These incidents, ranging from verbal to physical harassment by tourists to subtle undermining by colleagues, reflect how traditional gender expectations continue to devalue women's presence in public, physically demanding workspaces (Cheung et al., 2017). From a gender role theory perspective, women are still largely expected to be passive, supportive, or domestic, which makes their assertion of authority a cultural disruption (Costa et al., 2017), but empowerment theory sheds light on how some women have

developed coping mechanisms and assertiveness in response to these pressures. However, for those without strong support systems, institutional neglect exacerbates vulnerability, illustrating how empowerment remains constrained when societal norms and institutional practices fail to protect or validate women in non-traditional roles.

The imbalance between working and personal life was another important topic that was brought up. Guides must spend most of their time away from home during trekking because of the nature of their employment, frequently in isolated locations with poor communication (Alemada, 2019). Departure time puts female guides in conflict between their professional commitment and social expectations because there is still an expectation to handle family and household duties (Costa et al., 2017). Moreover, trekking work is seasonal and unpredictable, and there is more freelancing in Nepal, which adds to the persistent financial instability and lack of security for the future. Having a steady income or obtaining benefits like paid time off or insurance is challenging because of this labor precarity. Most guides are unemployed during the off-season, yet they still have caring obligations and financial insecurity all year. Also, an absence of institutional or any childcare support often forced females to choose between income-generating opportunities and caregiving duties.

Additionally, female guides' answers highlighted the difficulties associated with menstruation and hygiene. Managing menstruation during hikes has been described as physically and psychologically exhausting due to the absence of public and hygienic facilities in high-altitude areas (Bhatta et al., 2023). Given the effort and exposure to the environment that hiking involves, this is still a serious but often ignored issue. Addressing these fundamental needs is made more difficult by the stigma and secrecy around menstruation. Thus, speaking about menstruation and issues between the team, family, and friends is necessary to break the societal rule against discussing it.

Additionally, physical danger was also highlighted, especially in relation to the demanding activities associated with high-altitude trekking. Due to physical exhaustion, altitude sickness, bad weather, and dangerous terrain, female guides frequently have restricted access to medical care. These challenges are made more difficult by the expectation that women can handle the physical

demands as men, even though they frequently lack the means and expertise to do so. Female guides are particularly vulnerable while working because of this physical strain and a lack of support networks.

Similarly, this research shows how guiding has created significant opportunities for empowerment. Many women explained that working as a guide helped them feel stronger, more independent, and more respected in their communities. Initially, they often faced criticism or discouragement from relatives and neighbors, but their achievements changed these negative attitudes over time. This change in perception shows that social empowerment is possible when women take on visible roles in the tourism industry and prove their abilities through their work. As previous studies have noted, when women break traditional gender roles and succeed in public professions, they can change how society views women's capabilities (Hillman & Radel, 2022).

Economic empowerment was also an essential part of their journey. Before becoming guides, many women had no income and relied on family members for financial support. After entering the trekking sector, they could earn money, contribute to household expenses, and make their own decisions. An income gave them more control over their lives and a greater self-worth. However, they also explained that the work is often seasonal and freelance-based, which makes it challenging to have a steady income throughout the year. This kind of financial instability reduces the long-term benefits of their economic empowerment. Similar challenges have been found in other studies, where tourism jobs give women short-term independence but lack the security and benefits needed for lasting financial stability (Upadhayaya, 2013).

Women's entry into the sector was made possible in large part by training and educational opportunities. Formal training programs were the first step toward becoming professional guides for the majority of them. Along with teaching students technical skills like first aid, map reading, and safety protocols, these programs also boosted their self-esteem and communication skills. They were equipped to operate in a field that is dominated by men because of to this capacity-building programme.. Research indicates that training is crucial for women to feel prepared and capable in professional roles, particularly in sectors where they have historically been underrepresented (Gurung & DeCoursey, 1994; Kontogeorgopoulos, 2022).

In addition to formal training, women also learned through experience. Working with international clients, solving unexpected problems on the trail, and managing group dynamics helped them grow personally and professionally. They became more confident in their abilities and more skilled in handling various situations, both physically and professionally. This type of learning by doing is essential for long-term capacity building, particularly in jobs that involve constant change and physical challenges (Moore et al., 2019). Initially, the women in the interview were questioned about their choice of profession and faced doubts about their abilities. Over time, these negative opinions changed as they continued to work and succeed. Gaining respect from family, neighbors, and even clients made them feel proud and valued. This shift in perception is significant because it demonstrates how awareness and social attitudes can change when women are given opportunities and excel in public roles (Baral et al., 2020).

Overall, this thesis demonstrates how persistent gender norms and societal expectations influence women's professional navigation and perceptions, hence influencing the experiences of Nepali female trekking guides. Women are still prevented from attaining full acceptance and advancement in the trekking industry because of the perception that guiding is a physically demanding and male-dominated profession. However, many women are actively redefining these boundaries by becoming more independent in their social, emotional, and economic lives, boosting their self-esteem, and defying conventional norms, as seen through the perspective of empowerment theory. Yet, empowerment remains conditional and incomplete when institutional as well as government support is low, precarious employment, and deeply rooted social and gender norms remain unchangeable. Empowerment, as shown in our study, is not a one-time outcome but a continuous process shaped by organizational factors, cultural expectations, and the availability of opportunities. A comprehensive approach that tackles the cultural and structural barriers preventing women from achieving independence and finding employment will be necessary for any real progress. This thesis contributes to a more comprehensive and theoretical understanding of how women negotiate agency in traditionally male-dominated industries, such as adventure tourism, by examining it through the lenses of gender and empowerment.

Chapter 6

Conclusions

This thesis has examined an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of Nepali female trekking guides, focusing on how they navigate, sustain, and grow in a male-dominated field. Drawing from interviews with five female guides working across both popular and remote trekking routes, the study revealed how their professional journeys are shaped by a mix of personal determination and the persistent influence of gendered cultural expectations. Even though this study only included five interviews, the breadth and significance of the participants' experiences yielded enough information to address the research question and achieve the objectives of this thesis because the similar, rich, and diverse narratives were sufficient to produce significant findings using a qualitative, inductive technique, even with the small sample size.

Although tourism presents opportunities for financial independence and personal growth, the guides face structural and social challenges, including discrimination, gender inequality, safety concerns, and balancing professional responsibilities with domestic duties. The stories shared by the women in this research show not only their personal efforts and successes but also hint at a slow but meaningful change taking place in Nepal's tourism sector. As more women step into guiding roles that were once seen as only for men, they begin to break down gender barriers and open doors for others both in cities and remote villages. Their paths reflect inner resilience and also reveal how access to the right training, tools, and safe environments can help women grow in their profession. To truly support this progress, there needs to be fair policies that reach all regions, better infrastructure, and proper safety systems. Only then can Nepal's tourism industry become more balanced and supportive for everyone. This is not simply a matter of fairness but a necessary step toward a sustainable future where the contributions of women are fully recognized and valued. It became evident through interviews that others still tell some women that trekking is "not a woman's job," reflecting a broader societal bias. Even with these ongoing challenges, several of the female guides interviewed are pushing back against traditional gender roles, gaining self-assurance through training, experience, and leadership opportunities. Some of the interviewees' stories demonstrate how tourism can serve as a powerful means of empowering women in Nepal (Hillman, 2019; Hillman & Radel, 2021). Yet, in many remote regions, institutional support continues to fall short. Women in places like Rukum, Humla, Dolakha, and Solukhumbu often

lack infrastructure and access to basic things like toilets, networks, emergency service, training in language skills, safety practices, and health awareness, which limits their ability to take part in the trekking industry fully (Simkhada et al., 2010). The study emphasizes the importance of regionally inclusive training centers and support programs. These should include not only skill-building workshops but also mentorship and financial support for female-led enterprises such as guesthouses, trekking agencies, and training centers in various convenient locations. Stronger legal safeguards against workplace harassment and discrimination must also be enforced to improve working conditions for women.

This study indicates that there are still many obstacles that female tour guides must overcome. More research is still necessary, though. Future studies could look at how these problems impact women of different ages, races, or cultural backgrounds. Following women over time to observe how their jobs evolve might also be beneficial. The experiences of female guides in various nations could be compared to demonstrate the influence of legislation and culture. Further research on the mental health of female trekking guides and the impact of stress on them would also be beneficial. Additionally, another important subject is analyzing how male mentors and supervisors hinder women's advancement. This upcoming research has the potential to enhance the guiding profession and draw in more female trekkers.

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Appendix

Interview questionnaire

General questions

1. Can you introduce a bit about yourself like name, status (married /unmarried), job type?
2. How long have you been working as a trekking guide?
3. Why you did decide to work as a guide?
4. What is a minimum qualification and a training do you need to become a guide?
5. From where did you get the training to become a guide?
6. How do guides usually find work?
7. How do clients react to having a female guide?

Questions that related to the career challenges

1. How does Nepali society (including your family) view you as a female trekking guide?
2. Have you ever been underestimated or questioned because of your gender or physical appearance?
3. Are there any barriers like social and culture that limit your participation in trekking tourism?
4. Have you noticed gender-based differences in the profession?
5. How do you perceive your roles and responsibilities within your household and community, particularly after marriage?
6. How does gender discrimination exist in your employment? Have you encountered any stereotypes/biases that have affected your work in the tourism sector?
7. Have you ever experienced or witnessed harassment (verbal, physical, or sexual) during your work? If yes, how did you deal with it?
8. Do you feel safe during treks, particularly in remote areas? Why or why not?
9. Is there any support from your company when such things (harassment) happen?
10. Do you feel this job affects your role as a mother?
11. How do you feel about being away from your family for long periods during treks?
12. What makes it hard to stay in touch with your family while working?
13. How does marriage impact your career in tourism? And what about the unmarried?
14. How do women in the tourism sector balance work and family life?
15. Do you think tourism jobs provide flexibility for women?
16. What physical or mental health challenges do women in tourism face?

17. Can you describe any obstacle or experiences you've faced as a female guide, especially regarding safety, accommodation, or interactions with male colleagues?
18. Can you share any struggle that women face in tourism sector?
19. What are the biggest obstacles to continuing in this profession?
20. Hygiene is often a concern for travelers in remote areas. Can you describe the challenges female guides and travelers face regarding hygiene during treks in Nepal?
21. How do you personally manage your menstrual health during high-altitude treks?
22. Do you feel comfortable sharing menstruation challenges with your team or clients?
23. Did you experience those cultural menstruation taboos growing up?
24. To begin, could you tell us what the main risks are that trekking guides in Nepal face during treks?
25. How do you manage these risks during a trek?
26. Can you share an example from your experience where you faced such challenges during a trek?
27. What role do you think the government should play in improving trekking safety?
28. What do you think trekking companies could do to improve safety for guides and trekkers?
29. Do you think the government supports women in your profession?
30. What do you think could be done to improve the welfare and safety of trekking guides in Nepal?

Empowerment

1. How did you feel when you first started as a trekking guide, and how has your sense of self-reliance developed over time?
2. How did your perspective on your career and future goals change after gaining experience as a trekking guide?
3. Could you talk about how you felt when you first started speaking in front of groups, and how your confidence has evolved?
4. Looking back, how do you feel about the impact you've had on others, especially in terms of being a role model and earning respect as a female guide?
5. How did you overcome the initial fear and uncertainty when you started in the trekking field?
6. Do you feel that the training empowered you to prove that women can lead in trekking and tourism?

Economic Empowerment

7. Can you explain how you've become more financially independent through your work as a trekking guide?
8. Can you describe how your role as a trekking guide has affected your ability to support your family?
9. Are you concerned about financial security in the long term?

Social Empowerment

10. How has the respect from your community and family changed since you began working as a guide?
11. How do you perceive gender roles and responsibilities within your household and community, particularly after marriage?

Capacity Building

12. What were some of the initial challenges you faced, and how did your training help you overcome them?
13. Can you share how your leadership skills have improved since you started leading groups, and what specific skills you learned in training?
14. What was the most valuable thing you learned in your training, and how did it help you become more confident in your role?
15. How did the training help you navigate difficult terrains and manage groups of tourists?

Learning through Training

16. What was your experience with the training in terms of preparing you for leading challenging treks and ensuring the safety of your clients?
17. How did you feel when you first started as a trekking guide, and how has your confidence changed since attending the training?
18. What kinds of training or support have helped you grow in your profession?
19. What changes would help more women stay in this profession?
20. What kinds of support systems (like mentorship, creating peer networks) have you found effective in helping women in their careers in tourism?

Awareness and Changing Perception

18. Do you feel that the training empowered you to prove that women can lead in trekking and tourism?
19. Looking back, how do you feel about the impact you've had on others, especially in terms of being a role model and earning respect as a female guide?
20. How has the respect from your community and family changed since you began working as a guide?
21. How does tourism help women gain confidence and independence?
22. Do you see yourself as a role model or source of empowerment for other women? How?
23. What do you think needs to change in the industry to support more female trekking guides?