

Cultural and Tradition as a Dimension of Women Empowerment

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Abstract

The key objective of this paper is to measure the status of women empowerment in relation to culture and practice system as a major dimension of women empowerment at the grass-root level. This study is based on qualitative and quantitative data collected through 100 personal interviews (with women), 6 KII (with mayor and deputy mayor) and 6 FGD with the related stakeholders of the society. The study was carried out at three local bodies. This study shows the status of women empowerment in relation to culture and traditional system is slowly increasing because of the laws, programs, and policies of the government but the result is on the way to satisfactory only because Nepali society is still guided by orthodox thoughts and belief system which creates the hindrance in the mainstreaming women in the development process. Patriarchal thoughts, preferences, and priority to son/male, cultural practice and belief system are the factors which are creating problems in the process of women empowerment. From this study it is concluded that only making laws, policies and programs are not sufficient for the proper transformation of the life of women. Both male and female members of the society are guided by the deep rooted cultural and traditional practice system. To empower women cultural and traditional system needs to be transformed and awareness level needs to be increased.

Keywords: women, empowerment, culture, tradition, practice system

Introduction

In most of the country, women are placed in the vulnerable, deprived and marginalized section of the society because they are lacking behind the mainstream of the development. It is most common in the underdeveloped and developing country because of the poor empowerment process. In Nepal, women cover more than 51.5% (CBS, 2011) of the total population. This shows that the population of women is more than half of the total population but the women's representation at different levels is very low, which states that the state of empowerment is very low.

In context of our country numbers of women are limited in household activities; they are not allowed to take their own decisions related to education, health and economic activities. Like that they, not allowed to participate in the decision-making process with in the house and societal level because of domination of male and in some developed areas women are aware but they are controlled by social norms and practices.

Women are a means to develop society. For the holistic development of the society,

women need to be empowered. Women of Nepal are not getting power to practice in the real world because illiteracy and orthodox believers and cultural practices make women deprived of the power. Till the orthodox practices like chaupadi, boksi (black magician), etc. are practiced in Nepali society. The sayings like *pothi baseko ramrod hudina* (“A woman ruling house is sure to be destroyed”); are the examples that directly restrict women's participation in the different levels. Many communities like Muslims, Raute, chepang and others restrict women culturally to take part in social transformation.

Like that many women could not take their own political decisions like casting votes, participating in the political process, information about the governmental laws and legislation. Even though the Nepali women are not allowed to take decisions by themselves. The other male family members take decisions on the behalves of them. Even on the sever state too they do not take their own decisions because the male-dominated society has made them fully dependent.

Empowerment of women is essentially the process of upliftment of economic, social and political status of women, the traditionally underprivileged ones, in the society. It is the process of guarding them against all forms of violence. Women empowerment involves the building up of a society, a political environment, wherein women can breathe without the fear of oppression, exploitation, apprehension, discrimination and the general feeling of persecution which goes with being a woman in a traditionally male-dominated structure.

Literature Review

Women empowerment is the situation in which women move from the state of being oppressed to the state in which both the oppressor and the oppressed are equal, socially, politically and economically (Chattopadhyay 2005).

Gender equality, as another form of women empowerment, means according women equality of opportunity and removing obstacles that hinder women from participating fully in commerce, education, politics and culture (Backhans, 2007).

Rahman (2013) gender inequality is a product of the power relationships that exist between women and men in society. Rowland (1997) argues that every human society has a way of rewarding one sex with more power to the extent that the sex that has no power over the control of resources becomes the oppressed lot. According to Luke (1974) the concept of power in women empowerment helps researchers, academics and policy makers to examine the underlying social and cultural structures that define gender relations.

Educated women have the capacity to fight against cultural practices that condemn women to oppressed position in society (Murphy & Graham, 2008). Women who are highly educated gain more access to knowledge, information and new ideas (Maslak & Singhal, 2008). Therefore the human development perspective relates women's empowerment to cultural practices of capacity building through education, training and development (Inglehart & Norris, 2003; Inglehart & Wezel, 2005).

Methodology

The following methodology was adopted to meet the stated objective of the study, which includes sources of data, study area and sample, respondent selection, questionnaire design, data collection and method of data analysis. Use the following methodological strategies in the study.

Research Design

The study was based on descriptive and quantitative research design. The descriptive method was used to analyze and interpret the collected data from the study area. The research will be concerned to find out the culture and politics as the means to women empowerment in the community of Kageshwori Manahara Municipality of Kathmandu district, Godawari Municipality and Chure Rural Municipality of Dhangadi district.

The total number of the respondent for the personal interview was 100(35 from Kageshwori Manahara and Godawari municipality because these municipalities are larger in area and has more population as compared to Chure rural municipality and has to cover more areas and 30 from the rural municipality), 20 elected men and women for FGD were selected because male and female representatives provide actual information about the status of women in study area like that from each study area and 6 key informant interview were conducted because they are responsible for making an effective plan and its implementation at the grass-root level.

Result and Discussion

Culture is the base for the development of human civilization. In Nepali society, culture plays a vital role in the day to day activities of people. Slowly and steadily the cultural norms and values are changing but people still follow the malpractices which are hindering the development of an individual and society as a whole. Castes, gender, patriarchal thoughts, preferences to the son, Chaupadi, untouchability during the menstruation period are the major cultural malpractices that are hindering women's empowerment. This practice not only slows the pace of women's development but also slows the pace of community development. Some cultural practices are making women psychologically weak through which males are taking benefits from it. Here in this section, we will be analysing different forms of cultural malpractices that are hampering the process of development.

Culture is the means for the survival of the human community. Without the culture, no human being exists because we human beings are closely inter-related with the different types of culture; they might be in traditional and modern forms. In regards to cultural contexts, there is a different context that must be dealt with as we transcend cultural boundaries. We still see wage discrimination, human rights issues in regards to legal ownership of property, and companies as well as voting rights (Alyse, 2013) along with many other factors. Given the nature of empowerment, it isn't something that can be offered in a pretty package tied with a bow and handed out.

We have countries such as the US and those involved in the EU that have made strides in women's empowerment. These places

stem from many of the initiatives for feminist groups and women's empowerment. This is namely in response to societies that have very clear-cut and many times, oppressive gender role distinctions. Many of these cultures are very paternalistic and place emphasis on a paternal authoritarian infrastructure. Given the very nature of such worldviews existence empowerment in these types of places is a very daunting task. There must be a process of overcoming millennia of tradition and rearranging a way of life for many people whether it is in the Middle East or Sub-Saharan Africa. A much-nuanced understanding of these cultures and why they function the way they do is absolutely vital to creating programs that will be effective in leading women to a place of independence, individuality, and empowerment.

According to the time, the situation and geographical location culture differ. In the present day context, we follow the two types of culture they are, a modern culture that has a direct relation with the development and traditional culture which has a relation with the human civilization. In modern culture, there is minimal chance of discrimination, prejudice, and stereotype of feelings. In Nepali society, we could find both traditional and modern culture. People consider beliefs, traditions, customs, practice systems as a culture. Most of the Nepali culture is highly influenced by Hinduism because 81.34% of the total population follow it and then we have Buddhism (9.04 %), Islam (4.38%), Kirat (3.04 %), Christianity (1.41%), Prakriti and Bon (CBS, 2014).

In Hinduism women are respected and taken as a goddess but in real life, they are

the most discriminated group in society because they are always after males. In Nepali culture there are different types of practice system which make women vulnerable. The different traditional beliefs and practice system that hinders the mainstreaming of the women in the community development are the false system that is still followed in Nepali society. Some are mentioned below:

- *Dhilopaye, Chhorapaye* (“Let it be late, but let it be a son”);
- *Chhora paye swarga jaane* (“The birth of a son paves the way to heaven”);
- *Chhoriko janma hare ko karma* (“A daughter is born with a doomed fate”);
- *Chhora paye khasi, Chhori paye Pharsi* (“If a son is born, it is celebrated by sacrificing a goat, if it's daughter, a pumpkin is enough”);
- *Chhora bhaye sansar ujyalo, Chhori bhaye bhanchha ujyalo* (“Son brightens the whole world, whereas a daughter brightens only the kitchen”);
- *Kanya Daan* (“a daughter should be given away as a gift”);
- *Mare paap, pale punya* (“It's a sin if the groom kills the bride, charity if nurtured”);
- *Srimati bhaneko pitalako dhulo ho* (“Wife is the dust of the foot”);
- *Chhorimari, thulogharpari* (“If a daughter dies, we can say she has been married into a rich home”);
- *Pothi base ghar mahscha* (“A woman ruled house is sure to be destroyed”);
- *Swasni manche ko buddhi pachhadi* (“Women are always short sighted”).

This type of believers and practice system is the main problem which is hindering the pace of the community development

through women empowerment. The traditional practices and taboos that clearly exploit and discriminate against women and these are practiced all most all parts of Nepal. In most of the households, women and girls suffer most as they always eat last and get the least amount of food; women carry the heaviest work burden and often suffer serious physical damage as a result of working too soon after giving birth.

The practice of menstrual untouchability-women staying outside the house in the cowshed, or a specially constructed chaupadi, is strictly adhering to in most homes. However, she is still expected to do all household chores and farm work, except cooking, performing rituals. Many women are forced to give birth in the cowshed, often alone, and stay there with the baby afterward for the required number of days, sometimes up to one month. There are also food restrictions on the new mother (such as fresh milk), which seriously compromises the nutritional status of both mother and child.

To develop any kind of society and community we first need to consider Women are the key to community development and empowerment. In many small, rural communities all of the over world, it is women that perform all the labor for the household, work, compassionate, natural leaders, business savvy, and keep the family unit together (Neeson, 2011).

Priority to Male

In Nepali culture male is given more priority than females because we have some orthodox practice system which makes women second class citizens. From urban to rural areas first priority is given to a male, unless women give birth to the son she

continues giving birth. In urban areas, women went to a private clinic and check whether the baby is male or female. If the baby is female and one has a daughter previously then they does abortion. This priority to males makes women psychologically weak through which the development of women wouldn't take place.

In Nepalese societies, men and women have clearly defined roles that are dictated by the dominant ideology which is patriarchy. Most of the time men are taken as breadwinners; head of the household who has the authority to represent the family outside of the home. Since housework is solely the responsibility of women.

16% shares that the male is superior to females in both psychological and physical state so they are given first priority in family and social process. 22% share that they are not skillful to work outside the family because of the low education, leadership skills, and public speaking. 27% consider that female have less knowledge as compared to the male, so first priority goes to male. 15% share that opportunities are limited to females because of underestimation of the capacity of female, patriarchal thoughts and practice system of the society. 20% give equal priority to male and female regardless of his or her capacity, social and cultural practices. This 20 % is from the urban areas that have access to the resources and have a higher level of education as compared to others.

Problems Faced During Mensuration Period

Mensuration is the biological process that occurs in the women from the mid-teenage and lasts up to the average age of 50. Like

so many traditions, it has its roots in religion. Here is the story related to the menstruation which is related to Hinduism. The story is simple: there used to be a king of the gods, who committed a great sin. To make up for his horrible doings, he created menstruation, forcing women to suffer for and with him on a monthly basis. The Hindu scriptures state that while menstruating, women are highly infectious and spread viruses through their mouth and limbs, marking them as dangerous, impure and turning them into untouchables by following this orthodox believe system women are discriminated(Sayer, 2015).

In Nepali society, women have to face a different situation which creates psychological and social problems during this period. About 60% are facing different problems during the menstruation cycle like they cannot enter their room, they cannot touch the male and most one they cannot have nutritious food during this period. They are restricted to cook and enter the kitchen.

Only 10% do not face any kind of problem because most of the respondents are from the janagati group who do not follow the untouchability during the menstruation period. This shows that still their exist the untouchability during the menstruation cycle which shows that awareness level should be increased within the women and community.

Untouchability during menstruation is followed as a tradition and culture in Nepali society mostly in the upper caste group which results in discrimination regarding the natural biological process. The level of awareness related to menstruation is found to be less in both urban and rural areas. Women too are following the malpractices

which make them always behind. Untouchability during the menstruation directly considers women as different from males and is acts as a second class member of the family and society.

Patriarchal Thoughts

The family is the main institution of patriarchy, which is an important concept in explaining gender inequality. Literarily, it means “the rule of the father”; more broadly, it refers to a society ruled and dominated by men over women. This is inherent in most Nepalese families. Giving men a higher social status over females has crept into public life, which reflects in-state activities. The family plays an important role in maintaining this patriarchal order across generations. The socialization of children to expect and accept different roles in life has created a social mechanism for the development of values that engender the several forms of discrimination against the female sex. The greatest psychological weapon available to man is the length of time they have enjoyed dominance over women, who have taken it for granted especially in the area of politics that often continue to stereotype women and justify their subordination (Damilola, 2010)

In many societies, women are portrayed as weak and incapable of making smart decisions. They have been depicted across generations to be only capable of trivial matters, constantly engaged in gossip and hearsay, utterly incompetent and less intelligent. This was projected and reinforced through the years through male-dominated institutions and patriarchal societies which internalized the idea that the woman was inferior. With the constant reinforcement of the notion that women are inferior in every aspect, it became hard for

women to pursue their political rights as an active participant. For a woman to enter politics, such patriarchal attitudes make it even harder. The truth is that such attitudes are not a thing of the past. Such attitudes towards women still exist in societies all over the world today – in both developed and developing countries.

Preferences to Son

In Nepali society always priority is given to son because a son is considered as a person to continue the generation. In Nepal, we have different belief the system which has a direct impact in the day to day activities of the common people. Different proverbs are used regarding the son as a preferred child. *Dhilopaye, Chhorapaye* (“Let it be late, but let it be a son”); *Chhora paye swarga jaane* (“The birth of a son paves the way to heaven”); *Chhoriko janma hare ko karma* (“A daughter is born with a doomed fate”); *Chhora paye khasi, Chhori paye Pharsi* (“If a son is born, it is celebrated by sacrificing a goat, if it’s daughter, a pumpkin is enough”); *Chhora bhaye sansar ujyalo, Chhori bhaye bhanchha ujyalo* (“Son brightens the whole world, whereas a daughter brightens only the kitchen”); these proverbs are widely used in Nepali society which reflects the priority to son.

22% give equal priority to son and daughter. But majority 88% of them give priority to son because male continue the generation as 29%, from cultural and traditional practice priority is given to son as 35%, and daughter goes to other’s house as 16% of the total valid percentage. This clearly reflects that in Nepali society from rural to urban areas first priority is given to the son and daughter in option. This shows that still, people need to make aware related to traditional orthodox practices.

Discussions and Conclusion

Empowerment is the essential component to bring any sections of the society in the mainstream of development. The dimensions of empowerment play vital role for the development from the individual level to the societal level. The level of awareness plays a vital role in the empowerment of an individual. Like that the motivation, support and access to the resources create the base for the empowerment. Family and community people have an important role in motivating, supporting and creating the environment for the development of an individual.

The constitutional provisions, laws, programs related to women are the foundation for the empowerment of the women’s group. Through this study, it is found that empowerment of women in Nepal is taking place at a slow pace because the cultural practices plays vital role to empower the women sections who are still deprived and marginalized section of the society and are far from the mainstream of the development process. In each and every dimensions of empowerment women are weak or are not representing effectively because of the tradition, practice system and the dominance of patriarchal thoughts that both male and female are holding and they still transforming it to the new generations.

From this study, it is found that women who are from urban areas are more empowered culturally and politically and contribute more than those who are from rural areas. From this, it could be concluded that globalization, modernization and access to the minimum requirements helps to empower women in different dimensions of the empowerment process.

It is found that women are still unaware of the existing policies, programs, and laws which are for them because they have low education status and exposure to the outer world. To empower and develop any sections of the community one should consider the holistic approach. The cultural practice system is linked with decision making and participation which determine the development of the individual and community. To empower women education creates base, motivation, and support are the two essential components for the basic empowerment of women. Level of social awareness plays a vital role in the empowerment of an individual.

Lack of capacity in decision making process, shyness, economical dependency, the problem in public speaking and leadership skills are the major problems that women representative are facing while participating in social activities. Like that cultural and social practices, Lack of awareness related to the roles, responsibilities and working areas, male domination while performing activities at society and official level, wrong perception of community people related to the elected women representatives are the problems faced by elected women in the community level.

Like that creation of favorable opportunities, equipping with the skills and training related to the political process, transforming the prejudiced thoughts to support and motivate for the participation, increasing the awareness level associated with the laws, policies, and programs are the foundation for the political empowerment of the women.

While generalizing the collected information it is found that the status of

women empowerment in Nepal in relation to cultural dimension is on the way to the satisfactory. But lots of activities need to be performed while working with the women to empower in different aspects. Like that the policies and laws of Nepal government is inclusive and this helps to make women aware in different dimensions but its strict implementation should be ensured and women should be taken as an ally not as a burden while working for the development of society.

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