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THE SOCIAL WORLD OF NEPALESE WOMEN

Dr. Samira Luitel*

Introduction

The social situation of Nepalese women is complex and cannot be explained with a single paradigm. The differences are demarcated by the geographical region, economic situation, cultural and caste variations. However, the position of a woman in a family is a determining factor to decide her status in that family in particular, and in the society in general. Thus, the social world of a woman is the picture of her position in each household. To make it clear—the mother, mother-in-law, daughter, daughter-in-law, sister, sister-in-law, etc. have their particular roles and responsibilities and enjoy different status in their particular family. All the women play their roles associated with a particular relation to each individual. Thus a single woman would be playing multiple roles relevant to the relation with the particular individual. There might be individual differences but in general it is learnt or is taught by the system through the process of socialization. One can observe the world of women and men quite distinguished and different rather complete in itself that emphasizes in maintaining the patriarchal values of domination and subordination where some are seen more powerful than the others. Although it is very difficult and also problematic to explain and assess the social status of women from a single perspective, it is also important to look at the relationship among women within the household to see how their single world looks like. I have tried to sketch here how these relationships among women have played roles in creating the subordinate position of women and have victimized a large number of enthusiastic and creative women in return.

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In our hierarchical system, a person who is in the top profile in the relation holds most of the decision-making power due to the respect given to that position. This criterion implies to womenfolk also. So a mother or the mother-in-law usually holds the top position in a hierarchical family network among the women and withholds the authority and power in the family. Being her child a daughter always enjoys the total freedom and liberty. A daughter-in-law on the other hand has less liberty and freedom but more responsibility as the mistress of the household. One can observe the role of a mother and mother-in-law quite different for the daughter and the daughter-in-law and vice-versa. The most crucial role of a woman is seen in being a daughter-in-law where most of the important part of her life is spent. It is found that in most of the cases she is exploited by the authoritative members of the family whether male or female in the new family. The most interesting part is that a daughter-in-law who is legally the authoritative mistress of the household, in practice is not given the full power immediately after marriage. She is rather given only the duties and responsibilities to look after the household and the family members. She becomes only the nominal mistress of the household without power and prestige. This is the hardest time for most of the women in their life where they hardly get liberty of choice in work or in their personal life. A daughter-in-law has to compromise with the interest of her in-laws to fit in their system in the new family. It is like having rebirth and learning the ways of living and dealings as expected from her in the new family network. In most of the cases the daughters-in-law begin their socialization process following the tradition of oppression and injustice as taught by their elders to adjust in the family. In a system of early marriage a woman has to bear all these hazards throughout her life from the very young age. So she begins and ends her life blaming her fate in being a woman as her predecessors did. She then herself becomes an oppressor in her turn, in this way the cycle is completed and rotated which makes up the system of a particular society. Education has hardly changed such tradition and the thinking of the individuals where the educated women are also facing the same problem of oppression even today as

Bista (1991) observed. Here I would like to present a case of a daughter-in-law in an extended Nepali Brahmin family.

Durga holds a graduate degree and is married at the age of 20 in a middle class Brahmin family. She is the eldest daughter-in-law and now the only daughter-in-law in the family. Soon after her marriage is given the responsibility to look after the household chores. As a benevolent and dutiful daughter-in-law, Durga gets up early in the morning at 5 a.m. or even earlier, and starts doing her daily routine works. First of all she goes to toilet and then takes bath, changes her dress, and washes the clothes she wore last night. She then sweeps the floor, enters into the shrine and cleans the room, makes all the things ready for pooja for her father-in-law and mother-in-law. She then goes into her room, combs her hair and gets ready herself and then arranges the room. After that she enters into the kitchen, prepares tea for all the family members and serves each of them. There is a maid who is kept to help her but most of the time she would be doing outside jobs e.g. cleaning the courtyard, doing the dishes, tending the animals, etc. After tea, Durga starts doing the preparation for morning meal which has to be cooked for about 20 people. She makes the vegetables, dal and rice ready, cleans them and takes to the kitchen. She then brings a bucket of water from the tube well in the court yard to prepare food. By nine o'clock she gets the food ready to serve her sisters-in-law and brothers-in-law who go to school. The other family members who stay home would not eat the food until 11 a.m. They would be frequenting in the intervals so she has to wait for each of them to serve the food. She serves the food for the household servants or keeps it aside if they come late. In the last she eats the cold and left over food which she shallows with water to fill her belly rather to enjoy it. She then cleans the kitchen, takes the dishes outside to wash which is done by the maid. By the time she finishes her morning duty it is 12 to 12.30 p.m. If she does not have other works e.g. washing the clothes, drying the grains or stitching the clothes she will take rest until 2. p.m.

She enters the kitchen by 2 p.m. to prepare the snacks and tea for the family members and serves it by 3 to 4 p.m. After that she gets started with her evening duty to prepare the evening

meal. By the time she finishes doing her evening meal it will be 10 to 10.30 p.m. She goes to bed at 11 p.m. and shares some time with her husband to enjoy her married life. Durga pretends to be happy with her husband only to please him as he is the sole authority to sanction her stay in this house. Another main and hidden purpose is to give birth to a son to keep on his lineage which is the strong support to establish herself in this family. These are the most common routine works of her everyday life besides other additional works which come occasionally e.g. treating the guests or sick people and taking care of children or tending the animals or working in the vegetable garden etc.

After three years of her married life Durga gave birth to two daughters. Now, besides her daily routine works she has to take care of her two babies. There is no rest period in her life except in the night when the babies are asleep. Sometimes she has to wake up in the middle of the night to change the dippers or to feed the babies. Durga feels herself a perfect housewife and is happy in her home, however she has seldom been able to please her in-laws. The birth of two daughters made the total family upset, which was not in her control. Now, quite often she listens the words of dissatisfaction in her household works and dealings from her in-laws, especially from the female members. Besides this, they also blame her parents for not giving enough dowry, compare with other daughters-in-law in the neighbourhood as nice and hospitable than her. All these taunts make Durga more sick mentally besides her physical work loads. Often times she desired to leave the house but found no alternatives thinking of her husband and children. She could not think of going to her parents' home as it would be to bring conflict between the two families. Durga expressed her desire to her husband if she could hold a job but he was not in favour of it until the children were grown up. Another obstacle was that his parents would not allow it as it was not prestigious to work outside home by a daughter-in-law. This is a single case and there are many more cases of women in our society which needs in-depth case study to understand the situation.

Durga and her husband have the same qualifications but hold different status (power and prestige) in the family. One is

the most respectable and powerful person in the household and the other is almost a slave who possesses nothing of her own and is only recognized by the name of her husband. If her husband also looks down upon her then she will have no place in this family. A woman's life is always at the mercy of a man who is her husband, and only this relationship is able to provide her the power and prestige in the family. If he is the authority then his dictatorship in the family and patronage provides her the privilege to enjoy some power through him. Either the father or the son, who holds the authoritative position in the family as the earning member or as the care taker of the household is the sole authority in the household. His wife then enjoys the privilege and power in the family and exploits that power to control other women folk. A woman who has no strong support from the male e.g. from the father, from the husband or from the son is thus prone to lead a miserable life in our social network. The following conditions can be considered to understand the situation of women:

- a barren woman
- a widow woman in an extended household
- a women giving birth to daughters only
- a woman who has co-wife
- a single woman with small children whose husband is away from home to earn a living
- a daughter-in-law in a large family whose husband is not earning
- a woman in a poor family with many children and a drunken or sick husband

We can provide thousands of such examples which put women in the most vulnerable position when there is no strong support from the male counterparts. Our patriarchal system believes that men do the right things and provide right judgment to all, so they are made strong and powerful both physically and mentally through socialization. Education has been a powerful means to make the patriarchal system even stronger. Men are given the responsibility to use their wits and physical fitness. Whereas women are trained to be benevolent, submissive and obedient to match the strong man so that the family harmony is

maintained. Therefore education was/is denied for women which is supposed to bring conflict in the mutual relationship of husband and wife as well as in the family. In the past it was also believed "women who learn to read and write become witch". This was due to the reason that an educated woman might be a threatening to the patriarchy. The partnership of the strong man and the feeble woman automatically demarcated their social field. That is why women were/are given only the household responsibilities that required manual work and physical labour than the brain. The planning and management responsibility of the household is also taken by men leaving women the housekeeping job only. The society has not thought women as capable of managing and planning for the betterment of the household whether educated or not.

The general feeling is that a woman is solely responsible for the ups and downs of the family and is considered as ignorant if something goes wrong in the household affairs. Whereas the males are considered as free from the household bondage and free to move as they wish, they are bestowed upon with the responsibility to control the family affairs and patron the women and the society at large. The total organization of our social system is such that women in majority are the owners of household without power and prestige and men hold the power to control the women. Whether educated or illiterate, women must be within the control of men. Just to be a man is important whether illiterate, disabled or moron. The legal system is also based on this ideology which thinks women the weakest person and does not rely on them in providing the rights to property or in any decision making of the household or of the self as long as the male person is there to safeguard her. The family system, social system and the national system all work in a hegemony to make the women the weakest person and exploit her to the extent it could. Not only her labour, and physical potential but even her flesh is used for the benefit of men in the humane world of mankind. That is why young girls are sold in the sex market as commodities before reaching to puberty. There is no value of women's life in the "man made world" of oppression and injustice. Since our history, women have not been able to live a

dignified life and it has not been long that they were forced to burn in their husband's funeral pyre. Even the rule of female has not been able to change this situation due to the impact of male dominated culture and that of male dominance in powerful positions.

The Reality

The Nepalese socio-cultural environment is far from congenial to the holistic development of a girl child. She is unwittingly branded as inferior even before she is born. The gender-linked disparity in pattern and practices of child rearing in the early years affect adversely her personal development (RIDA, 1991). The practice of rejoicing at the birth of a son and lamenting at the birth of a daughter is quite common in most of the communities. In such a situation even the mother regrets the birth of a daughter as the mother having many daughters is placed in a lower status, and if she does not give birth to a son she is likely to get a co-wife. On the other hand a woman having more sons enjoys a higher status in the family (Bennett, 1981). This is why when giving blessings to a married woman, elder people usually say, "Be blessed with sons." Most of the women who only have daughters also keep fasting in the desire of a son. The birth of a son is regarded as opening the door to heaven or getting salvation according to the Hindu philosophy. All these attitudes make women feel inferior to men and they lament throughout their lives for being born as women. The whole circumstances before them make them feel that they are not complete without the association of men and that their life will only be successful by giving birth to a son.

Women were kept in ignorance for long, and education was not considered as good for women. The belief that "women who get education become witches" was made widely popular in the society keeping them in complete ignorance. Until 1950 modern education was not sanctioned for the public by the autocratic rulers, so the general public had no access to education. Whereas the Brahmins had the culture of education it was available to men only for the purpose of conducting the rituals. Books like *Badhusiksha* which is the teachings for the

daughter-in-law, composed by the renowned poet Bhanubhakta was popularly read in the Nepalese houses. This book was enough to provide teachings how to keep the daughter-in-law in control. Women's values were confined to only house-keeping and child bearing. Some ancient texts described a woman as equal to a Sudra (an untouchable) with no access to rituals, and the contents of Manusmriti (a Hindu code of conduct) says "For women no sacramental rite is performed in sacred text : women who are destitute of strength and destitute of knowledge of Vedic texts are impure as falsehood itself" (cited in, Luitel, 1992).

Poverty is another issue that has direct effect on women. Girls in the poor family begin to work as early as the age of 6 and by the age of 6-9 they work four to seven hours a day (RIDA, 1991). They care for siblings, clean utensils, fetch water and firewood and tend animals. Their work burden increases with their age and even more profoundly after their marriage. These women who work hard and produce children in the very young age generally have poor intake of caloric diet. Due to this reason many women suffer from malnutrition, anemia, goiter etc. Sex trade has also made many young girls victim of AIDS. The cultural norms, economic condition and preferential attitude of parents towards the boys (RIDA 1991) all lead to create vulnerable condition of women. A girl child is neglected from the very childhood. This situation in later life leads them to suffer from malnutrition, emotional insecurity and inferiority complex (Acharya S. 1981). Uterus prolapsed and death among women due to complication of pregnancy is common among the Nepalese women. Early marriage and repeated pregnancy in early age gives rise to health risks leading to an increased rate of neonatal and post-natal mortality rates. Malnutrition, diarrhea and other communicable diseases are common among women. This is why Nepal is one among the only three countries having low life expectancy for female (52 years for female and 55 years for male) and high infant mortality rate 107 per 1000 live births (Census, 1991).

In my Ph.D. fieldwork which was done in Siraha district it was found that almost all of the respondent were married in early age 12-15 and they were engaged in the household chores

from the very early age. Their main work at their parents' place was to herd the cattle or buffalo, fetch water, look after their young brothers and sisters, and do dishes. The women regarded that even though they had to work in their parents' home it was not difficult as they were not obliged to work and could deny to do so if they wished. But at their husband's home they have to please everybody by their work and there is no rest till the end of the day. In their opinion to be a daughter-in-law was the worst part of their life.

Seclusion of girls is maintained in the higher caste groups both in the Tarai and in the hills which keeps girls away from many benefits. In addition to this in the Tarai region due to dowry and parda system girls are married at the very young age even before puberty which has put them far behind other social groups. The status of women study (1981) has shown the status of Maithili women as the lowest among the rest of the communities in our society.

Daughters of higher castes have different situation. In the higher caste Brahmin and Kshatriya family a daughter's earnings is not accepted and so they hardly allow their daughters to participate in the paid labour force. It also becomes their prestige to live in the earning of a daughter. Only in a very miserable condition would the parents live on the earning of their daughters. A daughter is rather expected to take care of her brothers who are supposed to look after her (not necessarily), when they grow up. This is why parents are reluctant to educate their daughters which has no return. Boys on the other hand are the future bread earners of the family and so are given the privilege and the chances as the parents could.

Major Issues

The Nepalese social system is based on patriarchal Hindu philosophy that empowers men and subordinates women. It is therefore that women are weak and dependent on men and derive their social status (including inheritance right, ritual status and access to property) from their fathers, husbands and sons. Her only property in her home (where she is married) is her ability to work. The more she works to sustain the subsistence

economy the more prestige she gains in the family. Bennett (1981) in her study of Parbatiya Women has shown a woman's power in the family as:

- her continuing relationships with her maiti (natal home);
- her sexuality which encompasses both her ability to bear children and to give (or withhold) pleasure to her husband;
- her ability to uphold or tarnish the honour/reputation (izzat) of the family in the community at large;
- her own labour and ability to contribute to the productivity of the affinal family.

Likewise, she emphasizes that a woman in a small nuclear family which depended on her agricultural labour to meet its basic subsistence needs, might, other things being equal, have more say than a woman in a large, fairly well-off extended family where her agricultural labour was either not required or could be replaced by the wage labour of others.

Some studies have shown that even though women generally represent the oppressed group in Nepalese society, in some communities women play a major role in decision making process. The Newar women of Bulu (Pradhan 1981), the Tharu women of Dang (Rajure 1981), the Kham Magar of Thabang (Molnar 1981), the women of Baragaon (Schular 1981) have been presented as treated as equals in their community. Similarly, equality and freedom among the Rai women have been described by Mc Dougal (1973); among the Limbus by Jones (1976); among the Sherpas by Haimendrof (1964); among the Rana Tharu of Kailali by Bista (1967) and among Tamang by Holmberg (1989). But all these women described by the writers are very hard working. Though women have a say in their household chores and farm-work it does not mean that the main economic decision in the disposal of property or in buying economic assets are done by women.

Women and Empowerment Issues

Women empowerment issue has been a hot cake at present. But there does not seem any significant difference from the welfare approach of the programmes conducted during the

Women's Decade. After 1975 was declared as the women's year women's issues were formally addressed. The Sixth Plan (1980-85) proposed strategies to be implemented by government and non-government agencies and institutions in the fields of education, health, employment, agriculture, forestry, cooperative development, and legal system. It also called for increased recruitment of women at all levels in extension and administrative fields through the program of incentives and quotas (UNICEF, 1987). The Seventh and Eighth Plans (1986-1991 and 1992-1997) also recognized women's importance to development but no specific measures were made to involve a maximum number of women in development process.

The Women's Decade made significant efforts to address women's issues at the national level. The Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Health, and Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, Ministry of Education each contained a Women's Development Cell to coordinate their own programs focused to women. In addition, the Women's Development Section (WDS) was set up in the Ministry of Local Development in 1982, to promote, initiate and supervise activities to integrate women in development activities. The Production Credit for Rural Women (PCRW) program was initiated through this ministry to enhance women's ability to generate subsistence and market income.

Quite recently the government has advocated for the empowerment of women. But the programs it has introduced is not different from the ones already started by WDS way back in 1982 which focused to enhance the economic condition of women. Even now women's contribution in the subsistence economy has not been considered as economic activity. Women are also neglected in the planning and implementation of development projects. Women who are already burdened by the household works are overburdened by the economic enhancement programs, as they have not been able to generate much income. The reality is that men have been benefited more than women from women's economic activities in a male dominated world and are enjoying more leisure. The economic programs have not liberated women from their traditional roles

as house wives. They are still underrepresented in politics, at both local and national levels. However at the national level the present government has made provisions to ensure that each party has 5% of women while contesting the election which is not made compulsory. At the cabinet level there is a single woman minister who is also given the charge of Ministry of Women and Social Affairs limiting her to her own field.

The National Code (Mulki Ain, 1963) brought about significant changes in family and property law and the legal status of women, providing equal rights for both sexes. The constitution also guaranteed that there will be no discrimination against any citizen in the application of general laws, as well as in respect of political and civil rights, on the ground of religion, race, sex and caste. However a son is given the right to the inheritance of property while a daughter is not. The whole fate of a girl lies in this very discrimination where she is denied from the basic human rights. While the son is regarded as the master of the house by birth, the daughter is left at the mercy of that master for her life. The more crucial aspect is that women have not been considered as equally competent to men although the constitution spells there is no discrimination based on sex. Imbalances between rights of men and women persist both in the legal provisions, particularly for property, and in the interpretation and application of the law. Even where legal provisions stand in favour of women, they often lack the resources, skills, and social support to ensure the enforcement of their legal rights (Bennett, 1981). Who is to blame for creating such situation of the female sex? Unless the constitution is changed the attitude towards women does not change and the position remains the same. In such a situation the programs that are aimed at empowering women, without changing their situation would just be a political propaganda rather a tool to benefit them.

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CULTURAL DIMENSION OF PASTURE RESOURCE MANAGEMENT IN NEPAL: A STUDY OF GUMBA SYSTEM OF THE NORTHWEST DOLPA

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Along the evolution of human civilization, the agro-pastoral societies have developed a diverse set of resource management ranging from simple to complex. This is mainly because of intimate and intricate knowledge of local physical and socio-cultural environment. The simple pastoralism is based on seasonal mobility of stocking herds towards high and low elevations in terms of seasons. In the same way, the complex pastoralism regulates the herds' movement by strict formal schedules, restriction on numbers and type of animals, reserving or deferring pastures, assigning members to particular pastures and controlling the amount of time spent in one pasture (Nimar:1995:245).

The agro-pastoralists of Nepal Himalayas including the Dolpo practice diverse set of natural resource management systems and to a large extent that differ from the practice of other parts of the World and the Nepal Himalayas as well. In the last few decades, the herders of North-west Dolpo have been adopting the complex system of pasture resource management. However, that is not modern and run in an indigenous ways. Being guided by the Bonpo philosophy, the system is functional only to the Gumba area managed by the Lamas which is typical

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