

## Participation of Women in Higher Education in Nepal

PUSHPA SHRESTHA\*

### BACKGROUND

Nepal is a small, landlocked Himalayan Kingdom, sandwiched between China on the north and India on the south, east and west in South Asia. Its shape is almost rectangular hyperbola and it encompasses about 147 thousand square kilometers. It has a population of 16.1 million, growing at about 2.6 percent per annum with high fertility (CBR = 42), mortality (CDR = 18), total fertility (TFR = 6.3), life expectancy at birth ( $e_0=47$ ) and high infant mortality (IMR = 135).<sup>1</sup>

It is a developing country, with a per capita income of about US \$ 160.00.<sup>2</sup> The economy is highly dependent on traditional agriculture. Only about 24 percent of population is literate, and about 7 percent live in urban area.

Educational programmes are highly essential components for national development. In this regard higher education plays more crucial rôle to transform a developing society into a developed one.

Females constitute about 49 percent of the total population of Nepal. If this half remains illiterate and backward, resulting in a higher dependency ratio the question of economic development becomes euphoria.

Keeping this fact in view, the Seventh Plan (1985-90) has devoted a separate chapter for women's participation in development programme. Since half of the population is constituted by women, it would not be an exaggeration to state that economic and social status of women is an important indicator of the level of national development. It is obvious that if this unexploited abundant human resources could be utilized through women's active participation in productive activities, high economic growth rate could be registered.

The Mexico conference of 1975 had suggested that every nation should prepare a National Plan of Action for Women's Development on the basis of the country's needs and demand and it should be conducted through public and private sectors in a planned way.

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\*Mrs. Shrestha is a Reader in Economics at Padma Kanya Campus, Katimandu. This paper was originally presented in seminar on Regional Cooperative Programme in Higher Education for Development in Asia and Pacific held in Bangkok from June 9 to 13, 1986.

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Keeping in view this objective, Women's Services Coordination Committee under SSNCC (Social Services National Coordination Council) in Nepal has prepared a National Plan of Action for the development of women by encouraging participation of women in all the social and economic sectors.

It is accepted that gradual implementation of the plan of action on practical basis should be made. But it has remained, however, in practice a theory. Nothing significant achievement has been made so far.

Women are participating to some extent in different sectors of economy, i.e., agriculture, private sector, industries, business and different units of HMG/Nepal, Corporations and Private Institutions. Even then women seem to be exploited very much among the members of poor families. When men idle away their time women work hard to earn their living as well as for increasing national output. Specially in rural area, the actual participation by women in economic activity is more than men in Nepal.

On this basis, it becomes essential to evaluate properly the work done by female human resources on the one hand and to widen the limited opportunities for women's participation on the decision making bodies on the other. With this realization, the Seventh National Plan has set the following objectives:

1. To provide suitable opportunities for the development of abundant female human resources;
2. To raise the economic and social status of women and
3. To gradually make women able and productive and self-reliant citizens by utilising their skill and talent.

### EDUCATION

Literacy is an indication of exposure to modern views and ideas and is therefore crucial for an overall analysis of women's status. In Nepal, as in most other developing countries there is a large disparity between male and female literacy rates. Women are under represented throughout the entire education system in Nepal. Although approximately 1,007,912 children or approximately 90.4 percent of the eligible population of 6-8 years old are enrolled in schools, only approximately 28 percent of these students are girls.

Girls generally are needed at home to look after younger siblings, tend animals and help with household chores like gathering wood and carrying water. In general educating daughters in Nepalese households is considered to be less important than educating sons. In fact, some parents fear that an educated daughter might be less desirable as a marriage partner because she might be less willing to do the manual works which she is expected to do in her husband's house.

Education is often regarded as the most significant instrument for reducing inequality between men and women in a society. In Nepal the literacy rate for both males and females has increased over the years. Male literacy rate has increased from 9.5 percent in 1952-54 to 34.9 percent in 1981 and for women it has reached from 0.7 percent in 1952-54 to 11.5 in 1981. Although there has been substantial increase in female literacy rate over the years, yet this falls far short of male's.

Moreover, the disparity between sexes in literacy rate has further widened during the intercensal periods 1952/54-1981. Male literacy rate was only 9.0 percent higher than female in 1952-54, but male exceeds female by 23.0 percent in 1981.

The only university of the country, i.e., Tribhuvan University was established only in 1959. The first English high school was established in 1859 A.D. followed by the establishment of about 150 primary schools in 1901, culminating in the opening of the first English college in 1918.

Before the autocratic Rana family regime was overthrown in 1951, there were just 321 primary schools, 11 high schools, one technical school, one college and a primary teacher training centre in Nepal. Following the fall of the Rana regime within a decade of democratic rule, the number of schools and colleges increased to 4,001 primary schools, 156 secondary schools, 33 colleges and about five normal schools under college of education. School statistics for the 1978 school year are: 9,404 primary schools, 2,639 junior secondary schools, 552 secondary schools, and one university comprising 67 campuses. Tribhuvan University (TU) has also given an opportunity to open private campuses.

Now, let us examine the trend of student enrolment in higher education since 1980-81 to 1984-85 fiscal years. The overall participation rate of female in higher education is very low. It is just 20 percent but for males it is four times (80 percent) higher in the fiscal year 1980-81. No significant change has been noticed within the last five years. Only marginal changes have been noticed. The percentage of women's participation was 19.7 percent in 1980-81 and 21.5 percent in 1984-85.

Out of 8,157 total enrolment in technical institutions only 1,108 are females. It is just 13.6 percent for females whereas 86.4 percent are males in the fiscal year 1980-81. No significant change has been noticed in the percentage of women's enrolment during the period 1980/81 - 1984/85. But in the institute of medicine appreciable figures for females are observed. It is in between 37.0 percent to 52.0 percent during this period 1980/81 - 1984/85.

For the engineering institute only 2.4 percent of female enrolment has been shown for 1980-81 and it has been registering an upward trend gradually, but it cannot be considered significant at all. The percentage has reached 5.7 in 1984-85.

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In vocational institutions also no significant change has been indicated. The situation has remained rather stagnant with slight fluctuations from 13.6 percent (1980-81) to 13.5 (1984-85).

In the institute of law, around 95.0 percent males are enrolled against five percent of females during the period 1980/81 - 1984/85.

But in general institutes a slight upward trend has been noticed. It is 29.0 percent for females and 71.0 percent for males in 1980-81 and it reached to 33.0 percent (females) and 67.0 percent (males) in 1984-85.

No appreciable changes are noticed for humanities and social sciences institutes. About one third of the total enrolment are females, around two third are males during 1980-81 to 1984-85.

### TEACHING STAFF

Out of total number of 3,809 teaching staff of Tribhuvan University, only 624 are females, which is 16.4 percent. Of them 113 are professors. All of them are males. Similarly, only one-tenth of the total readers are females.

The percentage of female participation for lower level post is gradually going up. Accordingly 12.8 percent females are lecturers. Of the 1,388 assistant lecturers 277 are females.

### NATIONAL LEGISLATURE

On the political scene as well the picture is dismal. Only three women out of 112 were elected to the Rastriya Panchayat (National Legislature) this year against the same number in the last general elections five years ago. Of the 20 members nominated by HM the King this year 5 are women against the same number in the last legislature. However late it may be, it is being realised in the Nepalese political circles that women also should properly be represented in the National Legislature. Things have started, as a welcome trend, to move towards this direction.

In order to expose Nepalese women to the outside world what is being practised since the last few years is that at least a woman is included in the delegation sent every year to participate in the UN General Assembly session.

### PROBLEMS CONFRONTED BY THE NEPALESE WOMEN IN GENERAL

1. Age-old social norms and cultural barriers with multiple caste systems have created problems in establishing institutions devoted solely to serve women's interest for higher studies. Till today there are only two girls campuses (Padma Kanya Campus and a Nursing Campus) being run under the one and the only Tribhuvan University.

2. Even the so-called educated and advanced men shy away when the question of allowing female members of their families to pursue their choices independently arises.
3. Even before law women are discriminated.
4. Domination of men in the Nepalese society is all pervasive.
5. Males are preferred everywhere.

#### CONCLUSION

Man's existence and survival throughout all the stages of civilization and development are intimately linked with what he does and produces. Economically active population both in quality and quantity from sexes is the true indicator of the economic development of a nation. The development of higher education undoubtedly plays a decisive role in the development of science and technology. But this presupposes that the system and structure of such high education are rational and of high quality.

Institutions set up to serve solely the interest of women are in their primary stages of development and as such active participation by women in activities in general is naturally very low. Socio-economic and cultural taboos forbid them from doing otherwise. The very reasons are responsible for higher percentage of their enrolment in the institutions under Humanities and Social Sciences rather than in Science and Technical Institutions. This makes it clear why one-third of the total enrolment are females in these institutions in the fiscal years 1980/81 - 1984/85. Except in Medicine, that too may be because of Nursing Campus, no significant changes in female enrolment are noticed during the said period.

Daughters are to be given away in marriage and hence, many parents even today believe, the investment made in their education is wasted. Moreover, educated women tend to pursue their own courses which the parents or the in-laws simply cannot tolerate. Higher education is thus thought unnecessary and unproductive. In some cases women with higher educational degrees are not preferred in marriage. And if such thing happens in a family educated daughters become a burden to the parents.

Above all, the problem of poverty further aggravates the progress of education in general and female education in particular.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. World Bank, World Development Report 1986, (Washington D.C., 1985).
2. Ibid.