



Research Article

Challenges of Madheshi Women's Feminists in Nepal

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Keywords: Madheshi women; challenges; homogenize; feminism

Abstract

Nepalese society is patriarchal, and the concept of an egalitarian society is not well understood by its people. The Madheshi feminists have been fighting against oppression, discrimination, and inequality between the sexes. This article looks at what challenges, Madheshi women feminists' have encountered to achieve gender equality in society. The methodology used for this article is a face-to-face in-depth interview and Key informant interview. The writer argues that the number of Madheshi women feminists has been gradually increasing. However, there are still several challenges to feminism. One of the major challenges is identified as the mainstream feminist movement's tendency to homogenize women's experiences that cannot address the diverse experiences of women from different castes, classes, sexual orientations, religions, and regions. The issues of marginalized women, including Madheshi are often not acknowledged by the mainstream feminist movements. The paper concludes that feminism is important for Nepalese and integrating all different voices is one of the challenges. The author suggests that the intersectionality perspectives of the mainstream feminist movement in Nepal could solve the barriers of Madheshi women. The research helps to understand the dilemmas experienced by Madheshi feminists. The study's findings contribute to the existing literature on Madheshi women, providing valuable insights for policymakers to advocate for equal opportunities for marginalized women including Madheshi. The affirmative policy will increase their participation in politics as well as executive positions. It also helps to build a more inclusive and representative feminism in Nepal.

Background/ Introduction

Feminism incorporates various social, cultural, and political movements, theories, and moral philosophies dedicated to addressing gender inequalities and advocating for women's equal rights (Pande, 2018). Feminism is a movement against a system that is so deeply rooted in social, political, and economic structure and that has implications not only for women but for men also (Castello, 2008). It tends to promote social, political, and economic equalities between men and women. Feminism tends to create an egalitarian society for all where everyone gets an equal opportunity and access in resource.

Feminism differs from person to person and is shaped by individual experiences and political, social, and economic contexts. One of the groups of feminists thinks that the aim of the feminist movement is to address social and political issues, including the advancement of women's education. However other groups think that the movement in history aimed at transforming the social structure to achieve gender equality (Acharya, 2024). By changing in social structure women can have equal opportunities, rights, and access in every sphere of life. Traditional social structure often hinders the life of the people.

The documented histories of Nepal show that Nepali women have been actively involved in the patriotic movement since 1918 AD. For instance, Women warrior-like Indreni Thapa and Sabitri Devi actively participated in the battles of Nalapani and Kangada in 1814 AD. Similarly, Ms. Kamala, (the wife of warrior Balabhadra Kunwar) played a role in the defense of Nalapani Fort in the Anglo-Nepal war in 1814-16. The presence of dead bodies of women inside the Nalapani Fort serves as evidence that Nepali women warriors actively participated in combat against the British Army in the History of Nepal (Onta, 1996; Ojha, 2010; Sharma, 1965, as cited in Tumbahangphe, 2002). They show courage remarkable during the war. They fought along with the men for their sovereignty.

The woman's condition was worse in the Rana regime in various aspects. The education was confined to the members of Rana's family and the social elites who were closer to the rulers of the Rana regime (Aryal, 2017). During 1950, the literacy rate of Nepal was only 4% (Gauge, 1975, p.92). Women faced lots of challenges compared to their male counterparts in every sector until now. The challenges range from unequal access to education, healthcare, employment, resources, administration, and more. Adhikari (2022) reported the status of Nepalese women, they hold 33.09 % of seats in the federal parliament and 36.36 % in province assemblies out of 275 members House of Representatives (HoR), and 550 members of the seven province assemblies (PA), despite comprising 53.91% of the country's population in Nepal. Out of 330 PA seats under the First past the post (FPTP) system in all seven provinces, only 14 female candidates secured their victory, including two in Province 1, four in Madhesh, five in Bagmati, two in Gandaki, and one in Lumbini Province. These statistics indicate that Nepal has yet to make significant progress towards achieving gender equality.

This paper looks at the challenges of feminism experienced by Madheshi women in Nepal to pursue feminism. There have been previous studies on feminism in Nepal, but few are conducted from the perception of Madheshi women. To fill the gap, this research was conducted through the perception of the Madheshi women, contributing to the existing literature of Madheshi women as a part of my ongoing PhD thesis.

Literature Review

Historical Context

In 2007 B.S., Rana's behavior was so autocratic towards the people, and a nationwide revolution was organized against their behavior. There were movements both within and outside the valley. In 2007, there was a conflict between the Mukti Sena and Nepal police in Birgunj. The town was encircled by the police from all directions and there was a tragic loss of many innocent lives and a profound terrible situation. Lots of innocent people lost their lives and those

who survived faced terrible hardship. Immediately after the victory over the Birgunj by the Mukti Sena. The farmers of Gaur were excited and approximately 10 thousand farmers participated in a rally and moved towards the main market of Gaur. The farmers were encircled by the Nepalese army and started gunfire among the mass of protestors in 3rd Mangsir in 2007 (19 November 1950). Unfortunately, around 15 to 20 individuals, including notable figures such as Shiv Prasad Singh, Rati Sanyasi, and Nandu Sahu lost their lives. Moreover, a hundred people were injured during the confrontation. (Raut, 2018, p. 181-182). Tumbahangphe (2002) also noted that about 5000 women, children, and men organized an anti-Rana rally in the Gaur in 2007 B.S. The mass was larger than ever. However, the situation took a sudden turn when 12 individuals were shot, and several women were arrested as a result of police forces firing upon the gathering of NC supporters.

Madheshi women took part actively in a peasant movement organized in Karjanaha village of Siraha district during 2011/2013 B.S under the leadership of Jay Govinda Sah against extensive powers of the landlord which seems to have gone without being recorded (Sah, 2020). A large number of farmers were arrested in the protest. Nepali peasants lacked land rights until the enactment of the Land Reform Act in 2021 BS (1964 AD). Most of the women were farmers and they faced various types of exploitation as laborers.

The *Kanra movement* took on Kartik 25, 2049 B.S (November 2, 1992). *Kamaiya* settlements, both within and outside Kanara Phante, were demolished using bulldozers, elephants, and the assistance of the army and police. The forceful eviction resulted in severe beatings of numerous *Kamaiyas* women and raped by forest guards and policemen. Tragically, Runche Tharu, one of the *Kamaiya* settlers was beaten to death by Forest Security Guards. According to his wife, Mrs. Gongi Tharu, "he was assaulted by the police with the gun while he was taking care of the crops cultivated by *Kamaiyas* under their collective farming". *Kamaiyas* women played a significant role in this movement, with notable leadership from individuals such as Kausila Tharu, Jagarani Tharu, and Patrani Tharu (World Organization Against Torture, 2006, p.15-16). The *kamaiyas* are a marginalized group in Nepal. This system was practiced in western and far-western regions, especially in the Tharu communities.

Perspective towards Mainstream feminist movement in Nepal

The feminist movement treats Nepali women as a homogeneous group. The movement does not acknowledge women's diversity. The approach assumes that all Nepali women are the same and their issues are also same. So, the movement primarily addressed the issues of higher-class, caste women, and ignored the agendas of marginalized

women. As a result, marginalized women do not significantly benefit from such feminist movements in Nepal (Tamang, 2009). The feminist movement in Nepal is monolithic and their approaches are limited to address the agendas of various groups of women. It often ignored the intersectional experiences of women from the marginalized community.

Acharya (2012) also agreed that mainstream feminist movements are unable to raise the issues of marginalized women. Mainstream feminist movements advocating for development programs have not been able to change the lives of marginalized Dalits and poor women. They often raised the issues of privileged-class women. For instance, the "Red Campaign" was conducted since 2058 B.S. in Nepal for human rights which was organized by a single women's group. The movement aimed to break the taboos of Hindu women. The movement helps to regain their prestige in society. However, they failed to consider that their actions were violating the cultural rights of non-Hindu women in Nepalese society, particularly those belonging to *aadiwasi janjati* communities (Rai, 2017, p.50). Similarly, Madheshi, Muslim, Dalit, and other marginalized women do not benefit from their agendas. So, diverse agendas are needed to solve the problems of diverse women.

Higher-caste elite urban women predominantly dominated the mainstream feminist movement. Madheshi, Janjati, Muslim, and Dalit women's agendas are often neglected. Jha (2017) stated that Madheshi women are mostly excluded from feminist discourses. Nepal is a heterogeneous country with multifaceted problems. However, the mainstream feminist movement treated women as a homogeneous group and overlooked their agendas. So Madheshi women need Black feminism which welcomes women from all minority groups.

The mainstream feminist movements' agendas are dominated by donors rather than women's issues. The women's movement is excessively politicized so women leaders cannot go against the party line. The movement has been critiqued for homogenizing women's experiences and challenges, treating all women as a monolithic group. The issues, experiences, and discrimination faced by women differ from one community to another community. For instance, Dalit women face untouchability, Dalit women face untouchability, a challenge not encountered by women from other backgrounds. Madheshi women encounter discrimination based on color, language, and nationality, distinct from the experiences of other women. Janjati and Muslim women face religious discrimination, a set of challenges distinct from those experienced by women from other backgrounds. Additionally, women with disabilities encounter physical discrimination. The mainstream women's movement in Nepal has yet to prioritize the distinct concerns of women from marginalized

communities, as a result, these women are being fragmented in terms of their specific agendas. They are often reluctant to transfer authority to younger feminists (Sah, 2019; Sah, 2023). Further, Durga Sob, who is a Dalit feminist also disappointed with the feminist movement and said that the mainstream feminist movement overlooks the double and triple marginalization faced by Dalit women.

Rai (2017) also agreed with the above views and said mainstream feminist movements do not consider the agendas of the marginalized community including Janjati. She said that the agendas of Janjati women differ from those of mainstream feminist movements. Such as Janjati women's focus on their identity, self-determination rights, proportional representation, access and control of natural resources, and end of discrimination based on ethnicity, social status, culture, religion, economic status, psychology, and politics. These issues have received less priority from mainstream feminist movements. However, Mainstream feminist movements are primarily focused on achieving gender equality, securing women's rights, reducing domestic violence, and stopping child marriage. Before 1990, the mainstream movements ignored the diversity among women. However, they have also started to raise the issues of women from diverse groups.

A study conducted by Kirmani (2011) in India noted that despite the shift away from using Hindu symbolism and the increasing awareness of disparity in power among women since 1990s, many argue that the mainstream women's movement remains dominated by an upper-caste Hindu perspective in its approaches and agenda in India. They are not prioritizing the women's agendas of minority groups. There is an appearance of Muslim women's women-led groups and networks during the 1990s. It shows a shift in the discourse on women's rights movements and a more nuanced approach to the question of women's rights and religion. The groups aim to bridge the gap between secular feminism and religious perspectives and to represent women's various identities in the women's movement in India.

The study conducted by Nkealah (2016) argues that African feminism overtly rejects lesbian, bisexual women, and transsexual women. They place heterosexual women at the center of their feminist politics with their emphasis on negotiation with and accommodation of (heterosexual) men – husbands, fathers, brothers, and sons. This is also very similar to Nepalese feminist movements, where the center of feminist discourse is predominantly on heterosexual relationships.

The mainstream feminist movement is led by Khas Arya and some Newar elite women in Nepal. Most of the women's rights activists are operating big NGOs. Now, it has started to raise the issues of diverse women. However, they have not addressed fully the agendas of Madheshi

women. For instance, Madheshi women's agendas are treated as regional and Madheshi agendas. The mainstream feminists became vocal in providing citizenship in the name of Nepali mothers however they are silent in the case of naturalized citizenship which has impacted more Madheshi women. They are vocal in the issues of women's participation but silent in proportional representation of marginalized women including Madheshi women.

Method

The methodology used for this article is a personal face-to-face in-depth interview and Key informant interview. This article also analyzed literature published in various journals and newspapers. A total of 54 in-depth interviews were conducted with the women's leader, women's rights activist, journalist, and family members of the women's rights activist and women leader. The participants of the KII were political analysts, journalists, and political leaders. The KII was conducted with the male participants to incorporate their views as well. All of the interviewees are not reflected here. The interviews were conducted over nine months. The interviews were conducted in Maithili, Bhojpuri, Bajika, Hindi, and Nepali. The audio recordings were transcribed and translated by the researcher.

Result and Discussion

Challenges

Patriarchies

In a patriarchal society, women are exposed to various forms of patriarchies constantly. Patriarchies differ from one to another according to class, caste, religion, time, and nation to which women belong. For instance, the patriarchies experienced by our grandmother were different than our time; it is different for indigenous women and higher-caste Hindu women; for American women and Indian women (Bhasin, 1993). So, patriarchies experienced by women with disabilities are different from the general women. Women with disability have fewer education opportunities.

Madheshi women are treated as second-class, they have to take care of household chores more than the men. However, their respect is not equal to men. Among them, Madheshi Dalit women experience patriarchies in different ways. A study conducted by Nautiyal and Bagwari (2022) stated that the so-called patriarchy has normally created problems for advancement and progress in the lives of women. Regarding patriarchies, almost all of the interviewee stated that they experienced patriarchies differently in their lives. They also agreed that patriarchy is one of the challenges for feminism. One of the interviewees shared her experience

My daughter studies in class six at a government school. She initially wanted to attend the school regularly. But after some time, she refused. When I asked her what was wrong, she was reluctant to

share at first. Eventually, she stated that students from higher castes made her sit on the last bench and after some time, she told me that the students from higher castes asked me to sit on the last bench and taunted her about being from a lower caste (mestar). The next day, I went to the school to discuss this issue with her teacher, who then resolved the problem.

Regarding the leadership and patriarchies in parties. One of the famous Human rights activists Mohana Ansari shared her views highlighting ongoing disparities and exclusions.

Patriarchy pervades every aspect of society. Muslim women often go unnoticed despite playing crucial roles. Political parties use women when they have to show a mass in the movement. But at the time of opportunities, they often allow their nearer and dearer. They did not provide conducive environment for women to work in the office as well. For instance, a Muslim woman was appointed during the formation of the Muslim Commission, but she faced challenges due to the lack of a conducive working environment. Further, during the commission's reformation under KP Oli's time, no Muslim women were appointed.

Struggle within the feminist space

One of the women rights activists who has been involved in human rights and women's rights activities for a long time said that our society is not easily accepting feminist movements. There is also groupism in the mainstream feminist movements. Though I involved. I want to share my views toward mainstream feminist movements.

Earlier, women's networks were formed in Kathmandu. However, there have been noticeable different groups at the center level. The diverse groups instruct and orient us according to their vested interests in the districts. That kind of instruction creates confusion among district-level women's rights activists. Therefore, our local-level issues are frequently neglected.

one of the prominent women's rights activists from the Madheshi community criticizes claims to embrace the intersectionality and diversity of the mainstream women's movement.

I am frequently invited by the feminist organization of Kathmandu to participate in their meetings and often go to attend their meetings. She further stated that equality is being articulated in the context of urban Bahun Chhetri women. Women's rights activists from minority communities are treated as representatives of their groups. They do not talk more about marginalized communities' issues. For instance, they unite and are outspoken about citizenship under the mother's name, but they

remain silent regarding citizenship for Madheshi women. Similarly, they agreed on women's participation, but they became silent when the seats allocated for Madheshi were strategically reduced by the Public Service Commission (PSC).

Language

I met one vice chair of the rural municipality who was born in India (Maiti) and from a Muslim community. I explained a comprehensive overview of my research including objectives to her upon visiting the rural municipality. She had previously served in the same position as vice-chair. She agreed to participate in an interview and requested to contact her in the evening to fix the meeting schedule. I called her in the evening, the phone continuously rang but no one picked up the phone. I was frustrated after three to four attempts in a short period, I thought to stop the interview with her. However, on the last attempt, her husband answered the call and fixed an appropriate time for the interview. The next morning, I visited her residence, and, our conversation started she shared her experience

During my first tenure, I faced numerous challenges primarily because I did not come from a political family. The Nepali language was also a hurdle as I had studied Hindi medium at school and speak Maithili language at home. All official documents were in Nepali, and even the training was conducted in Nepali language. Fortunately, my husband provided substantial support, although some individuals would jokingly refer to him as "joru kaa guulam" (wife's slave).

The criticism has often been internalized by women in politics themselves that some female candidates including, some running for deputy mayor, have been criticized because of their fluency in the Nepali language (Tamang, et al.,2023, p.93). Generally, in Madhesh people do not use their mother tongue as Nepali language. They only use it to learn it at the school level. Still, most of the people in Madhesh are illiterate.

Financial Challenges

In many countries of the global South, women have less control over economic sources. Nepalese women have less

Table 1: Representation in HoR through FPTP Vs PR

Caste / Ethnicity	FPTP		Total* (percentage)	PR		Total* (percentage)	Total		Total* (percentage)
	Men	Women		Men	Women		Men	Women	
Khas Arya	91	4	95 (57.58)	8	27	35(31.82)	99	31	130 (47.27)
Indigenous people	33	2	35 (21.21)	5	26	31 (28.18)	38	28	66 (24.00)
Madheshi	25	2	27(16.36)	4	13	17 (15.45)	29	15	44 (16.00)
Dalit	1	0	1 (0.61)	7	8	15 (13.64)	8	8	16 (5.82)
Tharu	6	1	7 (4.24)	1	5	6(5.45)	7	6	13(4.73)
Muslim	0	0	0	3	3	6 (5.45)	3	3	6(2.18)
Total	156	9	165	28	82	110	184	91	275
Percentage	94.55	5.45	(100.00)	25.45	74.55	(100.00)	66.91	33.09	100.00

*Figure in the parentheses indicate percentage; [Source: Biswokarma, 2023, p.46]

control over the economic resources. Women are facing higher poverty than men. The unemployment rate is high in Nepal.

I talked to Seema (pseudo name); a woman rights activist who lives alone in a thatched roof small house constructed a decade ago. She was also from the *mushar* community. When I asked her about the challenges as a women's rights activist. Then she shared her challenges.

I am not financially well off and struggle for sufficient food. Despite this, I have some loans also. So, I am working as a farm laborer and used to cut rice stalks in the field of my owner. He gives me some paddy (Dhan) as a wage. For this, I wake up early in the morning and head to the farmland. Despite this schedule, I go to the community to solve some women's related issues. Sometime times I unable to work in the field due to time constraints then it becomes challenges for me.

After her interview, I went to another interviewee whom I interviewed in a small park of the district headquarters, who was a former minister from the Dalit community. She spoke

Currently, there is no financial support available for the former minister. My house is far from the district headquarters. Daily, I have to travel up to the district headquarters because almost all offices are located in the district headquarters. I am not from a rich family which poses challenges in activism. Though I am doing activism voluntarily.

Underrepresentation of Madheshi women in decision-making positions

Women's equality and rights could be achieved through increased representation of women in decision-making positions. The Nepalese society is still reluctant to accept women as a leader is reflected in the data of politicians. For instance, there are no Madheshi women appointed as the president of any party even the Madhesh-based party. The Table 1 & 2 also shows their representation in HoR (House of Representatives) and provincial assembly.

Table 2: Representation in Seven Provincial Assemblies

Caste / Ethnicity	Men	Women	Total (Percent)	Men	Women	Total (Percent)	Men	Women	Total
Khas Arya	155	5	160(48.48)	13	62	75 (34.09)	168	67	235(42.73)
Indigenous people	75	6	81 (24.55)	9	59	68(30.91)	84	65	149(27.09)
Madheshi	55	2	57 (17.27)	6	24	30 (13.64)	61	26	87(15.82)
Dalit	2	1	3(0.91)	4	24	28 (12.73)	6	25	31(5.64)
Tharu	18	0	18 (5.45)	1	9	10 (4.55)	19	9	28 (5.09)
Muslim	11	0	11 (3.33)	1	8	9 (4.09)	12	8	20 (3.64)
Total	316	14	330	34	186	220	350	200	550
Percentage	95.76	4.24	100.00	15.45	84.55	100.00	63.64	36.36	100.00

*Figure in the parentheses indicate percentage [Source: Biswokarma, 2023, p. 50]

One Member of Parliament (MP) of Madhesh province shared her views that

Most of the women in parliament are often elected through a proportional representation system. However, they do not have more budget to mobilize in their field and their voices are not adequately heard in the financial decision-making process. There is discrimination between the MPs who is from FPTP and the ones who is from the PR system

Another Member of Parliament at the federal level also shared her observations, highlighting that

Many male leaders within political parties prefer women representatives who are obedient and unlikely to challenge their authority or present their critical views. Educated women capable of engaging in substantive debates are often discouraged. However, there is a slight shift observed in newer parties. Such as Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP), which are beginning to offer opportunities for educated and independent women.

Changing trends in Dowry practice

Dowry is the cash or goods given to the groom's family during marriage in many cultures, especially in South Asia. Many countries have enacted laws to eradicate the dowry system. Nepal has also implemented a policy to stop dowry. Nevertheless, it has been practiced in several parts of Nepal whether in the form of cash or goods. However, it is more widespread in the Teri region, particularly in areas along the border with India (Chaudhary, 2009). According to Upadhyay (2023) the dowry practice restricts girls' opportunities for higher education and employment in the community. Some parents believe that an increase in their daughter's education level needs a corresponding rise in the dowry expected from an equally qualified bridegroom for her marriage.

In case of dowry, the better the boy, the higher the price. After marriage, they are burdened with numerous responsibilities and cannot pursue further study. The research carried out by Rastogi and Therly (2006) stated that dowry is a social practice that is also linked with

domestic violence, abuse, oppression, torture, and in extreme cases, sometimes the tragic losses of women's lives. The study found that women are tortured and even sometimes killed and commit suicide by themselves. Women rights activist Rita Sha presented her views regarding the increasing trend of Dowry in Nepal. *Dowry has been increased because more educated people demand more dowry. So, there is female feticide.* Nibha Singh who is a women's rights activist said.

Forms of dowry have been changed and expenses associated with the marriage have increased due to the numerous costs of rituals such as ring ceremonies, Haldi, Mehendi, Sangeet, and so on. She further said that dowry is practiced even in hill communities. They give gold, goods in their daughter's marriage, and samdhini bhet. The people in Kathmandu go to measure the size of the room for carpet, curtains, and all other furniture before marriage. However, most of the dowry death is reported in Madhesh and sometimes dowry death is manipulated as suicide.

Researcher Bhola Paswan also agreed with the above view

Dalit did not use to demand dowry but they have been influenced by higher caste. He further added that either it is taken under coercion or mutual agreement. The reason may be that they are also influenced by the higher caste.

Journalist Roshan Janakpuri said that

The amount of dowry diminished comparatively among upper castes such as Jha, Brahman, and Kyasth due to advancements in education. But the culture is transferred to another caste.

If a girl does not have enough dowry, she is harassed by her law's family. Some of the girls are also burnt by the in-law's family. The Kathmandu Post newspaper published the news regarding the murder of women in Madhesh because of dowry (Gahatraj, 2022). However, many murder cases related to dowry are manipulated in the wrong way. The caste often reported as suicide.

Conclusion

The study found that Madhesi women to involve in the feminist movements. Madhesi women do not get full support for feminism from family because most people are confused about feminism. They think feminism is anti-male. They face many hurdles from family as well as from the community. Some of the traditional cultures also control the mobility of women. Financial challenges are also experienced by them because most of the women in South Asia are financially dependent on their husbands or male members of the family. Most of the women are involved in unpaid care work. Further, a mainstream feminist movement led by higher-class Bahun Chhetri Pahadi women treated women as homogeneous groups and ignored the agendas of marginalized women including Madhesi, Dalit, and Janjati women. Their representation in decision-making positions is very minimal. Only a few Madhesi women are in decision making and they are unable to influence the policy of the state.

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