

A Cross-Sectional Study of Gender Politics in Nepal

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Abstract

This research paper examines the different dynamics of intersectionality in the political and cultural set-up of Nepal, where people of different religions, ideologies and ethnicities have lived for centuries. The paper tried to argue that variables such as class, gender, ethnicity, religion, region, disability and even caste influence the political and social status of Nepal. To study the real problems of women, all those parts that directly or indirectly affect their position must be underlined in the research paper. The article uses Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality to examine the dominant variables of patriarchy. The article focuses on the problems of Madheshi, Muslim and Dalit women who have always been marginalized in the political and social framework of the country. The primary finding of the study is that women belonging to marginalized class, caste, ethnicity, disability, religion and region are more oppressed in the country than women belonging to other categories. Because intersectionality is a burning approach to analyzing the position of women in patriarchy, theorists and researchers whose perspectives and ideas matter are brought into the discussion.

Key Words: Gender, Sexuality, Patriarchy, Ethnicity

Introduction

Nepal is culturally diverse but the issue of gender is generalized. The homogenization of women problems in the country has pushed a great chunk of gender category to the cultural, social, and political marginalization. The problems that women of ethnic groups particularly Madheshi women, Muslim women, Dalit women and even women of indigenous groups have been facing seem to have been neglected in the process of addressing women issues in a holistic manner. The trend of putting women of all ethnic groups in a single box and assessing them accordingly has been common since the time immemorial. Women with different social and cultural backgrounds have distinct problems. Therefore, their situations need to be studied and addressed differently. Indeed, the status of women in comparison to men is miserable not only in Nepal but also in India. The study by Mara Malagodi (2017) has demonstrated, “both India and Nepal have undertaken extensive statutory reforms in the area of reproductive rights, but both countries’ legislative frameworks remain incomplete and most importantly, they also retain an array of problematic features (especially in criminal matters) that will require further revisions if true gender equality is to be achieved” (p. 195). This research implies that women do not have any control on their reproductive rights as well. The reflection of patriarchy in political, social, health and other domains prevails dominantly.

Discussion

The position of women in patriarchy is weaker than that of men. Nepal, a democratic country, has marginalized women in various situations of life since the beginning of Nepali civilization.

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However, examining the case of women in general would be a mistake in the current political and social context. The weaker position of women can be seen in the reports prepared so far by various governments and NGOs. Nepalese women have suffered a lot of poverty, social exclusion and marginalization because of their gender. For ethnic minority women and low caste groups, these disadvantages are cumulative. “The 2013 Gender Inequality Index, reflecting gender-based inequalities in three dimensions—reproductive health, political empowerment, and economic activity—ranked Nepal 102nd out of 182 countries” (UNDP, 2013). The cross-sectional study of women in Nepal is mandatory to actualize the position of women from marginalized ethnicities and minorities. The report has projected the inequalities prevalent in Nepalese society not only based on the gender but also on the other categories such as caste, ethnicity, and region.

While designing and implementing policies for women's empowerment, the government must consider categories such as caste, religion, ethnicity and region to maintain women's equality. I am not saying that the government of Nepal has not worked for women empowerment. Many attempts have been made to change the traditional framework of Nepalese society politically, socially and culturally. For example, the government established the National Commission for Women and the National Commission for Dalits to strengthen the institutional and legislative framework for gender and caste equality. The government also implemented the decentralization strategy of the Local Government Act (1999) to facilitate the participation of the rural poor in decision-making and to make the provision of public services more inclusive, gender-sensitive and responsive to local needs (Asian Development Bank, 2016, p. 4). Despite such affirmative steps, women of the so-called lower caste and marginalized ethnicities namely Dalit women, Muslim women and women in Madhesh, women in the highland rural region of Nepal are still on the margin. They do not seem to have proportional access to government facilities and opportunities.

The concept of Jennifer Nash is relevant regarding intersectional study of the women issue in Nepal. Nash argues that intersectionality is used to mark the temporality of feminism, functioning paradoxically both as its “already-transcended past” and its “inevitable future” (2014, p. 46). Although these invitations seem contradictory at first glance, they share a racial ideology of black women's creative engagement with intersectionality. Without a doubt, Nash speaks to the issues faced by women of color in the United States. Her perspective on feminism is important in the Nepali context. In Nepal, women belonging to marginalized classes suffer from various levels of poverty and marginalization. The condition of Muslim women and Dalit women in Terai is worst after many efforts for holistic development of the country. Because of the practice of putting all women in one basket based on gender, the problems of marginalized women remained unresolved. Women of color are triple marginalized in the United States: first by gender, second by race, and third by class. Women of color from lower economic strata are victims in many ways.

Similarly, the most marginalized are Madheshi women who belong to other religions instead of Hinduism and are from lower economic strata. Their condition is similar to that of the colored women of the lower classes. Looking at the situation of lower caste women in the Terai, it is concrete that they suffer multiple levels of oppression: discrimination based on gender, caste, class and ethnicity. Their literacy rate is very low compared to upper caste, and hill women. The role of intersectionality becomes important in such situations. When the nature of intersectionality is reflected, the contribution of Black and other women-of-color feminisms to white-dominated feminist theory is often seen to consist in integrating considerations of “race” into white solipsistic—but otherwise supposedly adequate—discourses about gender. The intersection of race with gender cannot be anything but additive, since the formation of the category gender through the exclusion of women

of color is not interrogated. Intersectionality is represented as only remedial to white feminists' ignorance of their own racial power and of their racial/class oppression of women of color.

In the context of Nepal, a report prepared by the Asian Development Bank reveals the problems faced by low caste and ethnic minority women. Although there have been disruptions and losses in the conflict, some aspects of the conflict have opened new doors for women, especially lower castes and ethnic minorities. During the Maoist rebellion, new land rents, loan interest rates and labor wages were introduced for the benefit of the most disadvantaged; and steps were taken to eliminate caste discrimination. As a result, integrity in public space seems to have decreased. An important feature of the conflict was the participation of women as fighters and political cadres (2016 p. 5). The gist of the report is that the riots played a crucial role in raising the status of women, especially of low castes and ethnic minorities. However, their situation is pleasantly acceptable.

Despite the contributions made by women regarding family livelihood, they lack significant roles in decision-making process both at home and in public affairs. Their access to political and administrative positions has been minimal, especially for those from poor, low-caste, and ethnic minority groups in Nepal. Consequently, they stay behind in education and away from economic resources, social expectations of exclusive household responsibilities, and restricted mobility (Asian Development Bank 2016, p. 6). When connecting the perspective of Crenshaw with the intersectional status of women in Nepal, the attempts by feminists in politicizing the gender issue become clear. For Crenshaw, "women have recognized that the political demands of millions speak more powerfully than the pleas of a few isolated voices. This politicization in turn has transformed the way we understand violence against women" (p. 1241). She further figures out that feminist efforts to politicize experiences of women and antiracist efforts to politicize experiences of people of color have often proceeded as though the issues and experiences they each detail occur on reciprocally exclusive terrains. She adds that although racism and sexism readily intersect in the lives of real people, they seldom do in feminist and antiracist practices. Therefore, when the practices explain identity as woman or person of color as an either/or proposition, they downgrade "the identity of women of color to a location that resists telling" (p. 1243). On a similar note, Crenshaw talks about the intersectional situation of women. She pictures pathetic condition of women of color primarily those who belong to lower stratum in the United States of America. She states:

Where systems of race, gender, and class domination converge, as they do in the experiences of battered women of color, intervention strategies based solely on the experiences of women who do not share the same class or race backgrounds will be of limited help to women who because of race and class face different obstacles. (p. 1246)

Race and culture contribute to the fight against domestic violence in other ways. Women of color are often reluctant to call the police, likely due to the general reluctance of people of color to subject their personal lives to the scrutiny and control of police forces, which is often intimidating. There is also a more general community ethic to public intercession, which stems from the desire to create a world of faith free from various attacks on the public life of ethnically marginalized people. "The home is not simply a man's castle in the patriarchal sense, but may also function as a safe haven from the indignities of life in a racist society. However, but for this "safe haven" in many cases, women of color victimized by violence might otherwise seek help" (p. 1257). She argues that the struggle over which differences matter because conflicts are about more than difference as such; they raise critical issues of power. In her view, the problem is not simply that women who dominate the antiviolence movement are different from women of color but that they regularly hold power to determine, either

through material or rhetorical resources, whether the intersectional differences of women of color will be included at all into the basic formulation of policy (p. 1265). Her proposition clarifies the common efforts of women of color and the essentiality of their voices in the political framework.

Nepali women from low castes and ethnic minorities are finding their place in policy making, which seems impossible until all women in the country are judged on the basis of one gender. Therefore, every sociological part of women's private problems must take a cross-sectional reading and assessment of its problems. Collins (1990) argues that one way to recognize a matrix of dominance is to recognize certain axes of oppression as operating in the common experience of a social group, but at the same time those axes that privilege that group and that are subordinated. The second group is ignored (p. 229). The effort is to lower the axes on which the group has a privileged theoretical and political meaning than those to which the group is subordinated (Collins, 1990, p. 229). Collins further argues, "Each individual derives varying amounts of penalty and privilege from the multiple systems of oppression which frame everyone's lives" (p. 229). The both/and logic of an integrative approach to "the interlocking nature of oppressions" allows for a "broader focus" that provides the conceptual space needed for each individual to see that she or he is both a member of multiple leading groups and a member of numerous subordinate groups (p. 230). In this way, the dynamics of invisibility and visibility of embodied identities, subjectivities, and experiences are crucial and central to intersectionality as an intervention in categorical, essentialist thinking. If single-axis frameworks for conceptualizing oppression and resistance render women of low caste, class and ethnic minorities in Nepal and other multiply oppressed groups invisible if they refuse them representation as a group and refuse to see them emblematic power with respect to the groups to which they nominally belong.

The feminist research draws upon a gender and the crisis approach where the focus is on the gendered impacts on the crisis. A focus on gender as opposed to women calls for an understanding of the wider communal structures that reproduce the ongoing patterns of domination and inequality. Gender norms strengthen the three spheres of economy: finance, production and reproduction resulting in women's overconcentration in the reproductive sphere (Pearson and Elson 2015 p. 10). The neoliberal policy solutions to the crisis that require cutting down the public sector rely on and reproduce traditional gender roles that allot major responsibility of care for women. This leads to shifts in the national and European gender regimes (Walby 2011, 2015) and the EU sternness policies represent a 'critical juncture' that could lapse long-term progress achieved in gender equality in Europe (Rubery 2014). Gender policies and gender equality institutions have been downscaled in a number of countries at a time when they would be needed the most to counter the gendered effects of the crisis (Klatzer and Schlager 2014). A gender analysis that illustrates the patterns of the feminization of poverty and increases in gender violence points to the ways in which the economic, political and social penalty of the crisis are gendered in complex ways. Meanwhile, there is mounting space in gender and crisis approaches to recognize how gender intersects with other categories of inequality such as race and ethnicity, disability and class to result in differentiated impacts of the crisis (Kantola et al, p. 4-5). The knowledge on intersectional status of women with disability shows that a single parameter to resolve the problems of women in Nepal will prove a terrible failure. Therefore, the efforts by both government and non-government organizations must be oriented toward handling the gender issue with due consideration to other categories of identity such as disability, ethnicity, class, caste, religion, and region in the Nepalese context.

The efforts by the government to ensure the rights of the minorities and ethnic groups have not been sufficient and the plans and policies are still questionable due to the impact of patriarchy in political,

social and cultural frameworks of the society. The goal of implementing gender mainstreaming is that gender will become part of “normal” public policies and be integrated in the typical Nepalese political process. Since the 1990s, gender mainstreaming has been raised to the level of a legitimate and institutionalized public action instrument at the political level. However, this process of routinisation has occurred more in a context of (polite) disinterest than in one of the deconstruction of gender norms and the transformation of dominant power structures. Overall, this approach has been envisaged from an almost exclusively technical perspective and has been incorporated into existing “policy processes without challenging the gender norms and power relations that were at the heart of these processes” (Kantola 2010, pp. 146–147). Consequently, the impact of gender mainstreaming on the transformation of gender relations and the nature and degree of inequalities between men and women has been limited and gender mainstreaming has not been able to cushion the diverse legislative and budgetary changes and cutbacks that developed since the mid-2000s (Kantola 2010, pp. 33-34). These items of information reflect that a problem with gender mainstreaming is a burning problem. Along with this, Nepalese society having diverse groups of women has yet to do a lot for the incorporation of issues of women intersectionally.

Conclusion

Despite consistent efforts by Nepalese governments since the restoration of democracy in 1990, there has been very little structural change in politics, culture and education. Women from ethnic minorities and lower castes and classes continue to have nominal access to resources and political and social positions. Terai low caste women and women from Muslim communities are the most marginalized sections of Nepalese society. Their problems require special attention and efforts to solve them. The government and non-governmental organizations are failing to create an equal society with the inclusion of women of all classes and social classes. Proportional sharing of resources is one effort to maintain equality. Moreover, privileges should be given to women who are marginalized and discriminated on the basis of gender, class, caste, creed, religion etc. Intersectionality is a perspective that helps identify and address the issues of the most marginalized women.

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