

## Women Empowerment Reinvented: Recognizing the Role of Religiosity in Gender Equality

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**Abstract:** Religious practices world-over play a significant role in shaping societies, cultures, and people's beliefs and attitudes towards life. In Nepal, religion has been an integral part of the social fabric with women playing an active role in various religious practices. This paper mainly reflects the self-experience of 'situated reality' of Far-West Nepal by the author with the supportive literature from relevant sources. The discussion shows that women's assertive presence at 'religious space' of their family and community has a positive impact on their social empowerment, enabling them to access resources, participate in decision making, and challenge gender-stereotypes. It has improved their self-confidence, enhanced their social status, and given them a sense of identity. Moreover, it has provided them a platform to activate their agency, build social capital, challenge patriarchal norms, and promote their rights. This paper concludes suggesting that women's religious engagements can be a powerful means of achieving gender equality and their social empowerment.

**Keywords:** Gender equality, participation, religious practices, women empowerment

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### Introduction

Empowerment is both – a social process and a social product, which cannot be understood and explained by any single universal definition. It is an ongoing process within a community that involves respect, care, participation, and analytical reflection using which people gain greater access and control over life's resources. Often associated with feminism, the multi-dimensional social process helps people gain control over their lives by fostering power in them for use in their personal, community, and social lives acting on issues they consider as important (Mandal, 2013). Most definitions of empowerment focus on resources, agency, and achievement (Sell & Minot, 2018). Resources mean physical, financial, human, and intellectual aspects. Agency means capability and freedom to make individual life-choices. These two resources together constitute achievement that refers to individual's function or performance. Zimmerman (2000) means empowerment by the ability-building of individuals and groups to participate in the processes and action-based solutions that relieve their life's difficulties and alter unjust systems of social oppression through effective social change in three dimensions, namely: (a) Psychological empowerment; (b) Organization empowerment; and (c) Community empowerment. In a clear sense, empowerment is both – an individual as well as a social exercise.

Women empowerment is to challenge patriarchal ideology; to transform the structures and institutions that reinforce and perpetuate gender discrimination and social inequality; and to enable poor women to gain access to, and control of, both material and informational resources (Batliwala, 1994). However, the choices open to women are often limited compared to men of the same community – a manifestation of gender inequality – and that women can internalize their lesser status in society (Kabeer, 2001). Here comes the issue of empowering them at par with men. Rowlands (1998) states that women empowerment is the change in close relationship with husbands, parents, and mothers-in-law that comes

hardest, where positive and negative aspects of their life tend to be most closely intertwined. And I align with these scholars arguing that women empowerment is a continual process of their equal participation in society to live their own voice challenging every discriminatory domination or supremacy by men. Nepal has been a diverse country with a rich cultural heritage deeply rooted in religion, which has been an essential tool in shaping beliefs, values, and everyday life practices of people. However, women in patriarchal Nepal have historically been excluded from the major aspects of social and economic life for long, limiting them to domestic sphere. In the modern times, women's growing religiosity has enabled them to perform the roles that were traditionally meant for men including religious rituals, prayer events, and festival gatherings. And this has helped in challenging gender inequality in all walks of life where discrimination existed. Whereas the effort of government to achieve gender equality has been struggling due to the execution gap between policy and practice, women's religiosity can be seen as a potential tool for promoting their social empowerment.

The social system in Nepal has long been under a strong influence of patriarchal orientation that empowers men and subordinates women. By & large, therefore, women are weak and dependent upon men, deriving their social status (including inheritance right and ritual role) from father, husband, and son. Her only qualification or identity at her home (where she is married) is her ability to work. The women of Far-West Nepal have been striving for an empowered smile on their faces, at par with their men counterparts, by way of spontaneous participation in variety of cultural practices. The events include deity worshipping, singing, dancing, and other festivities. Males too have culturally acknowledged this assertion by females implying social recognition of equal status to them.

Though a multi-religious society, majority population in Nepal follows Hinduism and Buddhism. Religion has always been relevant as an important aspect of Nepalese culture for centuries, serving as a framework for people's identity and sense of community. So, religiosity has deep roots in the social, cultural, and emotional fabric of society. Earlier, women in Nepal often remained excluded from decision-making including in religious matters. However, they now show more involvement in religious practices, such as rituals, festivals, and pilgrimage, benefitting with social and cultural identity. But the extent to which women's engagement with religious activities contributes to their social empowerment has not been explored yet. Thus, this article attempts to analyze the effect of women's religious participation on their social empowerment in Far-West Nepal, largely based on the 'lived experience' of author.

This paper is guided by women's contemporary empowerment issue aimed mainly to meet two objectives: (a) To identify the religious practices that women participate leading to their social empowerment; and (c) To explain the role of religious engagements in empowering women.

### **Methodology**

In essence, this paper is analytical and descriptive in nature. It attempts to examine the effect of women's active participation in religious practices upon their social empowerment in the contextual

scenario of Far-West Nepal. The discussion contained in the paper is purely based on the experiential reflection of the author besides the related literature from the secondary source.

### **Empirical Literature Review**

Women's participation in religious practices has been studied in the context of various religions and countries. In Nepal, it has received little attention in research work. However, some studies have highlighted the potential of religion in promoting women's social empowerment. They find that religion plays an important role in empowering women by serving as a platform to challenge traditional gender norms and assert own rights. Bhandari and Thapa (2019) revealed that women's involvement in religious organizations was positively associated with their decision-making power within the household. The study also shared that such women had higher levels of self-esteem and confidence leading to their empowerment. Even Acharya and Bhattarai (2020) found that women who actively participated in cultural practices, such as attending religious events and performing religious rituals, had a higher level of self-confidence and self-esteem. Poudel and Dahal (2017) found that such women had greater social connectedness and community involvement, which enhanced their empowerment. The study also found that women who participated in religious organizations had greater access to information and resources on education and health, which added to their empowerment. Adhikari et al. (2021) add that women who participate in religious groups have higher social capital in terms of networking, relationship-building, and trust within their community. It is found that women's participation in Dashain, a major Hindu festival, gave them the opportunities to promote their involvement. Even Teej, another major Hindu festival, enabled them to exercise agency and build social capital.

One example of the impact of women's religious practices is of Bhaktapur Women's Saving and Credit Cooperative Society. The Society was formed in 1992 by a group of women, who were actively involved in religious practices. They came together to accumulate their resources and start a microcredit program to support their economic empowerment. The Society has since grown to become one of the largest microfinance institutions in Nepal, providing financial services to over thirty thousand women. The Society's success has been attributed to the solidarity among women, which was fostered through their participation in religious activities.

Another example of the impact of women's religious practices is of the Women's Alliance for Peace, Democracy, and Development in Nepal. The Alliance was formed in 1995 by a group of women, who were actively involved in religious practices and who were concerned about the impact of the civil war on women's rights. Since then, the Alliance has become a powerful advocate for women's rights by promoting their participation in decision-making processes.

In ethnographic research into the shifting marriage practices in Magar community of Nepal, Ahearn (2001) revealed that the day-to-day gendered practices vis-à-vis the changing relations between women

and men fostered a transformation not just in such cultural rituals but also in the very notion of 'self and others' radically re-shaping gender representations facilitating people to assert their own ability to act and attribute responsibly in such societal developments.

Khadka (2016) explores different emergent themes including Rituals/Festivals in Tharu community and finds that their collectivist culture and traditions support community's social fabric. This research concludes that such restorative practices help to continue community harmony and peace through forgiveness, reconciliation, consensus-based decision-making, and use of dialogue circles. And this fosters equal respect for individual members of the community.

Ojha (2011) reveals that the origin of Nepalese culture lies in the ancient Doti region of far-west Nepal inhabited by the people from different castes and communities, who collectively celebrate various festivals sustaining the indigenous and folk cultural heritage. Irrespective of diverse demography vis-à-vis castes including Brahman, Chhetri, Damai, Newar, Sarki, Kaami, etc, the important local festivals are Bisaun (Bisawa Sankranti), Ganga-Dashahara, Asar Pandhra, Hariyali Sankranti, Nag Panchami, Valke, Gamara (Gaura Parva), Teej, Rishi Panchami, Dol Jatra, Dashain, Tihar, Puse Pandhra, Maghe Sankranti, Shree Panchami, Hori (Holi), etc participated individually as well as collectively by all women and men promoting mutual acceptance and sameness.

In India, women's participation in the Sabarimala temple in Kerala state has been a subject of controversy, with women fighting for their right to enter the temple. In Bangladesh, women's participation in the Bishwa Ijtema, the world's second-largest Muslim gathering, has been on a rise, providing them a platform to freely express their opinions and participate in decision-making processes. In Indonesia, women's participation in the Hajj pilgrimage has provided them with the opportunities to exercise agency, build social capital, and challenge patriarchal norms.

All the above studies commonly suggest that women's participation in religious practices can contribute to their social empowerment in various ways. Firstly, religious practices provide women with a platform to exercise agency by allowing them to make decisions regarding their participation in rituals, festivals, and pilgrimage. This enables them to challenge patriarchal norms that restrict their mobility and agency. Secondly, religious practices enable women to build social capital by connecting them with other women and men in their communities. This provides them with access to resources, support, and networks that they can use to promote their rights and interests. Thirdly, religious practices provide women with opportunities to challenge patriarchal norms and promote their rights. According to Acharya (2003), women as cultural-beings are context-specific in Nepal even as they are universally the same physical-beings for reproduction. The majority women-headed households are concentrated in western and central regions in the country, which means that women exercise greater freedom, power, and share in everyday life decision-making in those areas. And my experiential similarity socio-culturally represents Far-West Nepal.

## **Discussion**

By understanding the individual identities and relationships that precisely create socio-cultural hierarchies based on gender, sexuality, age, caste, class, religion, ethnicity, etc, one can have a good insight into more realistic women empowerment concerns. Since cultural codes of social stratification influence mutual and multilateral relationships within a community, measuring true equality and real empowerment turns increasingly blurred. Women do not move up into strategic roles because they are not sponsored into them (World Economic Forum, 2013). It is, therefore, imperative that empowerment covers all – social, cultural, political, economic, and psychological arenas (Oxfam GB, 2005).

Studies have shown that women's participation in religious practices can have a positive impact on their social empowerment varyingly depending upon their culture and community. Religious practices can provide them a platform to express their beliefs and opinions, interact with others, and participate in decision-making processes. They can also enable women to access resources, and gain knowledge and skills that can be useful in other aspects of their lives.

Women's social empowerment has been a crucial issue in Nepal, where women face numerous challenges due to social norms, cultural practices, and gender-based discrimination. Although there have been efforts to promote gender equality and women's empowerment in the country, much remains to be done to ensure women's equal participation in various aspects of life. Religion has been an essential aspect of Nepalese culture and society with various religions coexisting in harmony. And religious practices have been an integral part of Nepal's social fabric with women playing significant roles in various religious activities.

In recent years, there has been a growing trend of women's participation in religious practices in Far-West Nepal. Women there are increasingly taking on roles that were traditionally reserved for men, such as leading prayer sessions, performing religious rituals, and participating in religious festivals. This has been attributed to various factors including increased awareness levels, changes in demographic roles, and the influence of information explosion through media. This has been significant in contributing to their social empowerment. It has provided them a sense of identity and purpose and improved self-confidence. Moreover, it has broken down barriers that previously prevented women from participating in various socio-cultural activities. Therefore, it is important to encourage and support women's participation in religious activities as a powerful tool for their empowerment.

Nepal has a positive feminist trend that has the potential to contribute to broader social and economic development. By recognizing the importance of women's participation in religious practices and addressing the underlying gender inequalities that continue to persist, we can achieve a more equitable and inclusive society in Nepal. Religious institutions also have a role to play in promoting gender equality by supporting women's participation in religious activities. They can do this by ensuring that women have equal access to religious spaces and that their voices are heard in decision-making processes related to religious matters.

The whole discussion above shows how different empirical findings mirror variety of social practices that people in general and women in particular associate-with for their spontaneous empowerment leading to their overall subjective well-being.

### **Conclusion**

This article has explored the role of religion in promoting social empowerment of women in Far-West Nepal. The study has investigated the relationship between women's participation in religious practices and their social empowerment. The findings suggest that women's participation in religious practices can contribute to their social empowerment by providing them with a platform to exercise agency, build social capital, and promote their rights. The study further highlights that the religious institutions can also contribute in addressing gender inequalities. For this, efforts are to be made to ensure that women's participation in religious practices is not limited to their traditional roles.

In Nepal, the participation of women in religious practices has had a significant impact on their social empowerment. It has allowed them to break down barriers that have previously prevented them from participating in various 'open life' activities. This trend is a positive step towards promoting gender equality and broader social development everywhere. The study is specifically clear that women's religiosity should not be limited to 'just presence', but even involve assuming leadership roles within religious communities.

In conclusion, the social empowerment of women through their participation in religious practices in Nepal is a multifaceted issue that requires a multi-stakeholder approach. While this study provides important insights into the potential of religious practices to promote women's social empowerment, further research is needed to explore the nuances of women's experiences and the challenges and limitations of using religion as a tool for promoting gender equality and women's empowerment.

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