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Negotiating Feminism and Stigma in Nepal: Woman's Rights Perspective

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Abstract

This article discusses the impact of stigma on feminism through the approach of critical reflective inquiry. It adopts conceptualization of stigma as having social components by Link and Phelan (2001), in discussion of how stigma is created and Kleinman and Hall-Clifford's (2009) approach on combating it. Utilizing evidence of personal experiences, I argue that stigma brings self-censorship and often refrains people from accepting their true nature. Stigmatizing feminism resulted in a generation of women alienating themselves from the concept, while still fighting for equal rights of women. The article begins with a definition of stigma, followed by a brief history of global feminism and feminism in Nepal. Then it shifts to discuss how western feminism was introduced as a stigma in Nepal and how it shaped the thought process of multiple generations, impacting the women right's movement. I use my experience as an example of how stigma shaped my perception of feminism and how I was able to combat it. I conclude that stigma around feminism changed the discourse surrounding feminism from being a struggle for equal rights, to fight against male-privilege, thereby sidelining women from the discourse. An understanding of the inception of this narrative is important in combating the stigma.

Keywords: feminism, intersectionality, political identity, stigma, women rights perspectives

Introduction

While previous studies have analyzed the term stigma for over six decades, little is known about its impact on women's rights. Goffman (1963) defined stigma as an "attribute that is deeply discrediting" and one that reduces the bearer "from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one" (p.2). Link and Phelan (2001) re-conceptualized the concept further by incorporating social dimension into individualistic definitions. This paper adopts the conceptualization of stigma by Link and Phelan (2001) and discusses how stigma around feminism was created, resulting in a generation of women and girls alienating themselves with the term "feminist". I argue that stigma created self-censorship and discouraged women to accept their feminist identities. Furthermore, it constructed division among the women's rights activists - therefore preventing any form of alliance between the two groups identifying themselves as 'feminist' and 'non-feminist' although the basis for their struggle was the exact thing: ensuring women's rights. In addition to this, it brought 'men' into focus sidelining 'women' from the 'women's rights movement'.

This year, I had the opportunity to participate in the 69th session of UN-CSW which took place from March 10 – 21, 2025 at the UN Headquarters

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in New York. It is the UN's largest annual gathering on gender equality and women's empowerment. It had over six thousand participants, including in person and virtual attendance from all over the world over the period of two weeks. UN-CSW is a space for discussion, interaction and commitment between organizations, government bodies and individuals working to ensure the rights of all women and girls. A session that stuck with me was a panel discussion by a team of young feminist GenZ Māori women from New Zealand. They discussed the importance of indigenous identities in women's rights movements and how educating children in schools is the best way to normalize the practice for future generations. They shared their experiences of leading indigenous women's rights movements. Seeing these young women embrace feminism with pride encouraged me to reflect on my experience - which was completely in contrast with theirs.

Building on the concept of stigma as a social structure, I present my experiences as a case study in understanding how stigma is created, how it results in self-censorship, and the process of de-stigmatization. This paper adopts the method of reflective inquiry, whereby I critically analyze my perception and understanding of feminism shaped by everyday practices, stigma, education, and geographical discourse over the years. I believe this article will be able to identify the feminist stigma that infected multiple generations of women, the process of combating it, and hence, contribute to the formation of a feminist society. I start this essay with a definition of the concept of stigma, followed by a brief history of world feminism and feminism in Nepal. Next, I discuss how western feminism was presented as stigma in Nepal and how it shaped the thought process of multiple generations. I then use my experience as an example for positioning oneself in the world of feminism and the process of overcoming stigma.

Theoretical Framework: Stigma and Feminist Thought

Link and Phelan (2001) criticized previous interpretation of stigma had individualistic focus and the studies on stigma were being carried out by those who were not stigmatized. They attempted to conceptualize the term that differed from the then existing literature. In their process of conceptualizing stigma, they talked about convergence of multiple components existing around stigma. I consider these components described by Link and Phelan as steps, where the first is 'distinguishing and labeling human differences'; second, 'dominant cultural beliefs linking labeled persons to undesirable characteristics – to negative stereotypes; third, 'placing labeled person in distinct categories so as to accomplish some degree of separation of 'us' from 'them'; fourth, 'experience of status loss and discrimination by the labeled person'; and finally, 'stigmatization being entirely contingent on access to social, economic and political power allowing the identification of differentness, the construction of stereotypes, the separation of labeled persons into distinct categories, and the execution of disapproval, rejection, exclusion and discrimination' (Link & Phelan, 2001).

Building on this socio-structural conceptualization of stigma, Kleinman and Hall-Clifford (2009) added a moral and local attribute to the concept, stating that a moral standing of a person in a local context affects the 'transmission and outcome of stigma'. In addition to this, they talk about how understanding the unique social and cultural processes of stigma creation in the lived world of the stigmatized could be used to combat stigma. I have used this socio-structural conceptualization of stigma in explaining how the stigma around feminism was created, which encouraged multiple generations of women's rights activists and women's rights supporters to alienate themselves from the term. Taking my life experiences as an example, I try to explain how understanding the process of stigma creation could assist in combating it.

Global and Local Feminist Histories

Feminist movement in the west had started around as early as 15th-16th century while their demand for social and political emancipation dates to the 17th century (Pandey, 2016). The first wave of feminism saw feminist organizations working around suffrage, trafficking of women, equal educational opportunity and property rights (Moghadam, 2005), while the second wave in

1960 rose to demand equality in all spheres of life. It was during this decade that call for equal remuneration and equal opportunity was made by the International Labor Organization (ILO) which was a big achievement, however, the discrimination on social basis remained, giving rise to the concept of 'personal is political' which gradually resulted in the adoption of the Convention on Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1979 by the United Nations (Pandey, 2016). Although the concept of 'the personal is political' cannot be traced back to one individual, it was made popular by Carol Hanisch, an American radical feminist activist, and it stirred conversations about issues such as sex, relationships, access to abortion and domestic labor – which were previously considered individual rather than systematic and political (Grady, 2018). During the UN Decade for Women (1976-85), clashes occurred between Global North feminists and Global South feminists as the former emphasized the need for legal equality and sexual autonomy while the latter focused on imperialism and underdevelopment as constrains for women's advancement. However, these differences started converging when feminists in the South started giving importance to issues of sexuality and personal autonomy, while those in the North began to see the significance of economic factors and forces in their lives (Moghadam, 2005). Furthermore, the UN offered global conferences on women and numerous regional preparatory meetings which became a means of networking for feminists across the globe, expanding transnational feminist networks. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action 1995 was one of the most important policy documents that emerged from these preparatory activities, conferences and concensus during the Beijing Conference.

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action 1995

In September 1995, the governments participating in the Fourth World Conference on Women, organized by the United Nations (UN) in Beijing, made a commitment to advance the goals of equality, address the constraints and obstacles hindering it, and enhance the advancement and empowerment of women all over the world. This conference resulted in the adoption of Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, 1995 that has been endorsed by the United Nations and its member countries ever since.

The acceptance of women's rights as human rights, governments were convinced that women's empowerment and full participation in every sector of society including decision-making and access to power are the basic requirements for achieving equality, development and peace (United Nations, 1995). The declaration highlighted twelve critical areas that needed immediate attention and intervention. These are: a. women and poverty b. education and training of women, c. women and health, d. violence against women, e. women and armed conflict, f. women and the economy, g. women in power and decision-making, h. institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women, i. human rights of women, j. women and the media, k. women and the environment ,and l. the girl child.

The first and the second wave of feminism, however, were criticized for centering only on white women and gradually gave rise to the concept of intersectionality in feminism which is ongoing. While feminism in the Global North was going through distinct phases, the women rights movement was active in Nepal as well.

Feminism and Nepal: Historical and Contemporary Tensions

Nepal has a history of women who ruled the country dating back as early as the mid-1500s. Historian DR Regmi writes about Queen Gangarani, wife of Visvamalla, the fourth king of Bhatgaon who ruled from 1547 to 1560, as being the powerhouse behind the throne for many years during her son Trailokya Malla's reign (Rimal, 2022). Similarly, Queen Rajendra Laxmi acted as regent and ruled Nepal after the death of her husband Pratap Singh Shah (Rimal, 2022). Queen Lalita Tripura Sundari had enabled Prime Minister Bhimsen Thapa to sustain his power in court and start a campaign against the British (Rimal, 2022). Although these queens were powerful and influential, their power was limited to quenching their thirst to rule rather than working for the benefit of women of their time. They were more involved within the walls of the palace.

The history of the beginning of feminism in Nepal, however, is traced back to Yogmaya Neupane, a poet, teacher, and an insurgent. Yogmaya was a Hindu religious leader who composed poems against patriarchy, the caste system, and the autocratic Rana regime. Yogmaya launched an effective political campaign during the 1930s where she taught people about the injustice of the system through her poems and verses, which ended in 1940 with her death (Aziz, 2001). She, along with her sixty-eight followers, committed mass suicide by jumping into the Arun River following her ultimatum to Juddha Shamsher, the then Prime Minister of Nepal (Aziz, 2001). The government covered up the episode and banned any mention of her following the tragedy.

The movement for the right to vote in Nepal had started in the late 1940s. Many women were jailed for marching in support of democratic movement in the year 1950 (Rimal, 2022). It was only after democracy came to Nepal in 1950, women's groups became active demanding rights to education, property, and equality (Rimal, 2022). Tara Devi Sharma had an instrumental role in outlawing polygamy and ensuring the right to divorce (Rimal, 2022). She was followed by numerous women who worked for ensuring the rights of women and although they did not identify themselves as feminists, Rimal (2022) writes that they laid the ground for 'the feminist movement to come.' However, I would like to claim that feminism had already been present in Nepal, although not realized or accepted since the term is attributed to the result of Westernization. Feminism as a term may not have entered Nepal then but the stuggle for equal rights of women was already in practice, hence marking presence of feminist movements. I argue that the experiences of these women activitists shaped and informed political context and resulted in their political organization and mobilization (Narayan, 1997). The issues feminists in Nepal are politically engaged in are citizenship rights for women, birthright citizenship through mothers, right to inheritance, end of violence against women and right to equality. Although abortion rights are legalized in Nepal, sexuality and gender is still a taboo topic for free discussion. Feminist movement in Nepal is yet to embrace the intersectionality within women (Rimal, 2022).

Personal Narrative: Negotiating Feminism and Stigma

In the early 2010s, a male friend of mine called me a feminist. I remember not feeling happy about the 'label' he gave me. I wanted equal rights, but I was not ready to be called a feminist, who were popularly known as unhappy women who 'hated' men (Grady, 2018). Angst (2009) writes about feminists as independent thinkers, perceived as someone who "threaten the fabric of social institutions that traditionally seek to rein in individual, and especially female," (Angst, 2009:125). Moreover, it was at a time when women rights activists in Nepal did not call themselves feminists, even though their persistent advocacy for women's rights made them feminists (Rimal, 2022). Moghadam (2005) mentions women activists in some countries being skeptical about feminism as they considered it Western, bourgeois or excessively anti-male. This angry, man-hating and lonely image of feminists had become canonical, as the second wave of feminism began losing its momentum and still haunts the conversation around feminism presently (Grady, 2018). Western Feminism in Nepal was introduced with this meaning wherein feminists were considered as man-hating and homewrecking individuals.

Even though feminism has been attributed to Western curricula, it is not entirely a western concept. As Uma Narayan (1997), an Indian feminist scholar, explains in her essay, she did not become a feminist after getting educated in America, but rather listening to her mother, observing her, and learning about the experiences of females within the family made her realize the importance of women's rights. It was a similar experience for me.

I grew up in a traditional middle-class household in south-eastern Nepal where disagreeing with elders was perceived as 'disrespecting' them. I was an opinionated child which did not go well with my paternal grandparents. My ability to speak for myself was considered a result of

'being spoilt and pampered by maternal family.' For the first seven years of my life, I had stayed with my maternal grandparents as the only child in the house. As I came back to my parents' house, I suddenly graduated to being an elder sister to two younger boys. This graduation also came with rules for daughters in the family, such as helping with chores in the household as we grew up, and wearing certain kind of clothes.

My maternal grandparents did not have concerns with me at seven years old wearing 'western' clothes. These included clothes that went above knee length and did not have sleeves. However, my transition from my maternal to paternal household meant a transition in the types of clothes that I would be 'allowed' to wear. Except for my mother, who would not voice her opinion to maintain 'peace' in the family, my existing clothes were not preferred by senior members of the family, including my father. As an '*ateri'* (stubborn) child, I would still wear the clothes I liked - until wearing them in public started making me uncomfortable in a town where girls would mostly wear traditional attire or a long frock, and people stared at girls wearing shorter clothes. I switched to wearing pants from then on. For my grandfather, wearing short clothes was no different than running around naked and we would get into an argument each time I wore it until a male relative from Kathmandu (the capital city) told him that this was far better and decent than the tank tops girls were wearing in Kathmandu. Although this statement was always a major part of my argument, it was from this day that my clothes stopped bothering my grandfather. I realized that the clothes were not the problem, but it was rather the gender of the person wearing it, as men in my family would be in their undershirt and shorts all the time. My family was not used to listening to a woman's voice and me being opinionated and 'vocal' child did not help the case.

My journey into feminism had started as early as the age of ten without my knowledge of either the term or its meaning. I would always question any differences I noticed in the treatment of my brothers and me. I always had questions which would lead to arguments or discussions. I was always the cause of chaos as I always contested my culture, wherein my mother would ask me not to voice my opinion. She preferred 'peace' over her own comfort and ongoing injustice. Although my mother suffered mostly in silence, she was intolerant when it came to our wellbeing. My relationship with my mother was slightly different than how Narayan (1997) describes her own with her mother. My mother wanted me to have my education, stayed firm against getting me married until I completed my master's degree (because she could not complete her bachelor's degree post marriage) and wanted me to have a career. My father valued education and would not allow us to work until we completed our graduate degree. At the same time, he would expect me to have compliance, deference and submissiveness (Narayan, 1997), qualities deemed essential in 'good' Nepali women while my brothers were allowed to be loud and dominating. Until this time, I was unaware of the term feminism although I fought for equal treatment as my brothers everyday. My journey into feminism had started from home. Why then was I reluctant to accept being a feminist?

It was a lack of open dialogue and conversation on feminism and women's rights. My understanding of feminism was limited to radical feminism and as discussed earlier, resonated as anti-male. Therefore, I identified myself as an advocate of equality as I believed in equal opportunities and treatment of boys and girls. I was yet to understand that this idea I held so dear was the very foundation of feminism. Furthermore, I had not met anyone who liked to identify themselves as a feminist, and I, like the majority around me, stigmatized feminism, without realizing I was one.

In 2018, I had the opportunity to participate in a residential workshop on gender and sexuality conducted by the feminist organization CREA, where the concepts of feminism, women rights, equality, LGBTQ rights, and body politics were discussed. I learned about the basic concept of feminism beyond stigma and intersectionality within the women's rights movement in the workshop. My constant interaction with the feminist women's rights activists gave me confidence to take the first step towards 'becoming' a feminist.

Discussion: Intersectionality, Stigma and Political Identity

The 'Western, bourgeois and excessively anti-male' (Moghadam 2005) characteristic of feminism is rooted in its colonial history. The treatment of feminism as a Western concept strips intersectionality and agency of people from non-Western culture and disregards the multi-dimensional struggle for women's rights that have existed around the world. While feminism was started as a struggle for equal rights and treatment between sexes, it could not remain unaffected by pre-existing hierarchy and power dynamics. The power dynamics between feminists in the Global North over Global South had created a form of savior politics whereby the feminists in Global North took upon themselves the responsibility of emancipation of women - discrediting the agency of the people in Global South (Narayan 1997). Moreover, this colonization of feminism further stigmatized feminists in Global South as being 'anti-nationalist' and 'disloyal to culture' (Narayan 1997). Nevertheless, this savior politics is not limited to Global North-Global South but is also present between 'privileged-unprivileged Global South' (Whetstone & K.C., 2023). The privileged Global South women typically have little understanding of grassroots women's needs and interests, yet they seek to save these women (Whetstone & K.C., 2023). In Nepal, a similar practice has been identified and the term '*Dijju Feminism*' is used for the category of mainstream feminists who do not recognize intersectional feminist movements and struggles faced by the 'lesser privileged group' (Chhetry, 2022).

Narayan had recognized and demanded the need of decolonizing feminism (Narayan, 1997) by which it gets separated from being a result of Westernization - allowing space for feminists to question practices that are harmful and oppressive to women, without them being labelled anti-nationalist and disloyal to their native culture. It also gives agency to the people within the culture to question injustices they experience by leaving behind the practice of 'othering'[1] that the feminists from the West did when 'working' to improve conditions of women in Third-World countries (Narayan, 1997). However, despite the commonly held perception that emancipation of women has spread from the West to other parts of the world, the practice had always been multi-directional and the current international consensus around particular norms regarding women's rights among the Global North and Global South is the result of parallel feminist movements globally which have learned from one another (Tripp, 2006). Tripp (2006) further writes that this consensus combines development and human rights interests, engages advocates inside and outside transnational women's groups, and is a product of global dialogue and interaction. This practice also calls for recognition and acceptance of intersectionality among different groups, especially in a country like Nepal where inequality is layered based on ethnicity, religion, social and cultural position, caste, and class. While the feminist movement in Nepal has started acknowledging the ethnic, caste and class-based differences, it is yet to incorporate issues of trans women, and gender and sexual minorities identifying themselves as women.

Conclusion: Toward a De-stigmatized Feminism in Nepal

My experience of 'becoming' a feminist is an example of how stigma is created, how it affects acceptance and how one can combat it. I had followed through the components of stigma (Link & Phelan, 2001) as first, I distinguished and labeled feminists as someone different than myself, then I followed along with dominant cultural beliefs that linked it to the negative stereotype of being a home-wrecker and man-hater. I then went ahead and separated myself from 'feminists' and when my friend called me a feminist, I instantly felt insulted and small.

As I progressed through my shifting ambivalence and eventual alignment with a feminist identity and with feminism, I started my graduate course in Anthropology. It was here that I discovered how culture and society give meanings to actions and concepts. I started learning and understanding how the meaning of feminism was created in Nepal and how it shaped generations

1. Othering is a practice by which a group or individuals are treated as different and inferior from the dominant social group.

of women fighting against the label yet fighting in support of what it stood for - women's rights. This dichotomous struggle held them back, just like it held me back from combating the stigma for a long time. The stigma also changed the interpretation of feminism from being 'a struggle for women's rights, equal rights among the two sexes' to being a 'man-hating campaign.' It is ironic how the fundamental fight for women rights sidelined women and brought men to the center of the discourse. Furthermore, it created a division between 'feminist' and 'non-feminist' women's rights activists resulting in lack of coordination and alliance between them. It prevented them from accepting that both groups were fighting for women's rights and that their struggle was against the system and not with each other. This acted as a barricade against the movement in Nepal - where women are fighting against inequality even after over a hundred years from when Yogmaya started the feminist movement.

Understanding this social and cultural process of creation of stigma attached to being a feminist and locating my moral standing in the local context (Kleinman & Hall-Clifford, 2009), meant recognizing my privileges as a cisgender Brahmin urban female. This helped me finally combat the stigma and become a proud feminist. However, not every woman/girl of my generation had the same privileges. While there have been remarkable changes in the feminist movement and the concept of feminism in Nepal - many women of my generation, including me, are still struggling to unlearn and re-learn, and put our new learning into practice. It is through understanding and practice of an intersectional collaborative approach that the process of de-stigmatizing feminism can be achieved.

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