The Paradox of Patriarchy: Men's Vulnerabilities in the Tharu Community of Nepal

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Abstract

The patriarchal social system has been recognized widely as a privilege for men, their negative effects on them remained under discussion which was generally not researched. This study, therefore examines the paradox of patriarchy through applying a mixed-methods of investigation of men's life experiences in Nepal's Tharu community. Combining survey data (n=80), focus group discussions (n=21), and key informant interviews (n=4), the research reveals how patriarchal norms simultaneously empower and constrain men. Findings indicate that men benefit from decision-making authority (75%) and property ownership (70%), but face significant vulnerabilities: 64% suppress emotions to avoid appearing "unmasculine," 59% endure stress as primary breadwinners, and 46% work in hazardous conditions, often as migrant laborers. Notably, 55% engage in physical violence to demonstrate masculinity, while institutional support remains scarce 50% perceive legal systems as discriminatory, and 35% report no access to mental health services. The study contributes to masculinities literature by documenting how patriarchal structures harm men in South Asia, challenging binary narratives of male privilege. Practical implications include recommendations for gender-inclusive policies and community-based psychosocial interventions targeting men's unmet needs.

Keywords: patriarchy, masculinities, men's health, Nepal, Tharu, gender norms

Introduction

Patriarchy is a social system in which adult males hold primary power predominance in roles of political leadership, moral authority, social privilege moral and control of property. In the domain of the family, father holds authority over the women and children. Some patriarchal societies are also patrilineal, meaning that property and title are inherited by the male lineage and descent is reckoned exclusively through the male line, sometimes to the point where significantly more distant male relatives take precedence over female relatives. The growing search on men and masculinity informed a lot of about how the patriarchal social norms shapes a man; to become a masculine. It is well accepted that the patriarchal societal norms favor men when a woman and girls are unequally treated or devalued. For man, to become a masculine is a must which has been much of beneficial for men but yet there are some areas that a man has to be tortured to become like this. The masculine sense of a man denies to talk about the hardships and vulnerabilities to be a man in the existing patriarchal societal norms. This is yet to be discussed among the men and how this vulnerabilities of men turns into damage. To become a masculine, men express themselves in both ways; harming themselves (men's violence) and harming others. Nepal is experiencing a lot of interventions to engaging men and boys to end violence, a research will bring a new insight on the practical way of how to engaging men and boys in redefining masculinities and reducing.

The dominant discourse on patriarchy has predominantly focused on its oppressive consequences for women, often overlooking how these same systems impose burdens on men (Connell, 2005). In Nepal, where patriarchal norms structure family and community life, men's vulnerabilities remain understudied despite evidence of rising male suicide rates (WHO, 2021) and labor migration-related trauma (Gurung, 2019). This study investigates the paradox of patriarchy in Nepal's Tharu community an indigenous group with distinct gender norms asking: (1) how does patriarchy harm men while privileging them? (2) What barriers prevent men from seeking support?

Theoretical frameworks of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995) and gender role strain inform this analysis. While global scholarship has examined men's mental health (Addis, 2008), South Asian contexts remain underrepresented, particularly regarding indigenous communities. Nepal's patriarchal structures, compounded by post-war trauma and labor migration trends, create unique pressures for men to conform to provider/protector roles (Tamang, 2020). By centering Tharu men's narratives, this study complicates simplistic notions of male privilege and advocates for intersectional approaches to gender justice.

Objective

The major objective of this research is to go deeper into the notions of men's vulnerabilities in the existing patriarchal social norms.

Literature Review

Patriarchy: Patriarchy is a term to describe the society characterized by the current and historic unequal power relations between women and men and boys, where women are often systematically oppressed and disadvantaged. This happens in almost every aspect of life but is noticeable in women's lower representation in key social and legal institutions and in decision-making positions. The violence against women perpetrated by men is also a key feature of patriarchy. Women who are in the minority group face several dominations in the society.

Patriarchy is simply a social system. The male is provided with the primary authority to functionalize in social organization, political leadership, control over property and authority over women and children in the family. It allows the social institutions to give privilege to male and entails female subordination. The patriarchal ruling system is manifested socially, politically, and economically.

Masculinity: Masculinity is a characteristic of a man and the trait of behaviors and actions that are typically considered only for man. It can be a different understanding to the different culture and the geographic locations but entails the female subordination in actions preferred by male members in the family and the society.

Masculinity is the set of attributes, actions and behaviors of men and boys that are associated to them for just being a male member. It can be called boyhood, manliness and or manhood. Masculinity is often socially constructed based on the biological sex and the expectation of the family and the society from that particular sex, male. Both the men and women females can show masculine traits and behavior. Masculinism refers to advocacy of the rights or needs of men and boys in the existing family and social structure.

Violence against men: Violence against men is the acts that are exclusively committed against men. Men are overly represented as both the victims and the perpetrators of violence. Men's sexual violence is treated in a different way in any given society that may be unrecognized by international law. According to a study, the violence against women was about a third more likely to be reported by other parties to the police regardless of what the gender of attacker. Although the most likely to be reported gender was a male perpetrator and female victim. The stereotyping use by law enforcement is a recognized issue in different violence scenarios. And there is no or limited legal framework for the women to be prosecuted when they commit violence against men.

Problems associated with patriarchy: Abuse of men takes many of the same forms as it does against women physical violence, intimidation and threats; sexual, emotional, psychological, verbal and financial abuse; property damage and social isolation. Many men experience multiple forms of abuse. Men, more so than women, can also experience legal and administrative abuse the use of institutions to impose further abuse on a victim, for example, taking out false restraining orders or not allowing the victim access to his children. Men are assumed to be violent and aggressive. People defend this because women need to defend themselves, but they don't defend racial profiling when it's justified with identical arguments. Men are assumed to be unsafe to have around children because they are likely to be sexual predators. Hiring discrimination is incredibly commonplace in industries related to childcare, such as becoming a maid or babysitting. The legal system frequently resolves divorces by giving excessive compensation to a spouse that did little to contribute to acquiring wealth. This primarily hurts men because they tend to make more money, but it's nonetheless seen as more socially acceptable for women who "worked hard to support the man emotionally" while men are seen as leeches. There are interesting trends developing with regards to women being less likely to be fired from jobs. Some argue they receive higher pay despite doing less work, and there are variables that explain aspects of pay-gaps that are largely ignored. Men have higher suicide rates, perhaps linked to the excessive responsibilities linked to having the role of "master." The stresses and responsibilities men are given are not necessarily outweighed by the benefits of patriarchy. This is not given enough attention, nor is prostate cancer in comparison to breast cancer. Men are made to feel guilty for their position of advantage. They are often expected to continue to that position in the same way women are expected to continue in a position of disadvantage. Sexual objectification of men is becoming more acceptable. Men are discouraged from reporting domestic abuse due to stereotypes regarding manliness. Violence against men is depicted as humorous. Slapping or punching men is generally seen as acceptable even in non-satirical contexts. Male victims of family violence and abuse-like women often face many barriers to disclosing their abuse but men have barriers to disclosing.

Methods

This mixed-methods study (primary data collection and academic review) was conducted over a six-week period (January-February 2018) in Dang District, Nepal, a region with a dense Tharu population. Participants included 80 Tharu men (aged 15-65) surveyed across four villages, 21 focus group discussion (FGD) participants, and four key informants

(community leaders, social workers). Purposive sampling ensured representation across age, occupation, and marital status.

The research title is purposefully chosen to understanding men's vulnerability in existing patriarchal societal norms in Tharu community, Dang, Nepal. Because, in the gender relationship, a lot of research has been done to for the women's status in the existing patriarchal society and very few have been discussing about the men's vulnerabilities among the current social structure in Nepal. Considering the fact that the research topic is a vague issue, the researcher tactfully focused in a particular place, the particular community and the particular aspects of the research area. Only men's experience and their aspirations were covered in this research. The research was trying to identify the practical strategies to address men's vulnerability in the existing patriarchal societal norms by analyzing the trends, causes and effects of the patriarchal social values on men and boys in the family and society.

Data and Interpretation

The study used mixed methods of study including the academic review of existing knowledge and the primary survey data colleation via structured 25-item questionnaire, administered face-to-face, assessed privileges (e.g., decision-making autonomy, property rights) and vulnerabilities (e.g., emotional surpression, workplace hazards). The survey was conducted over a week in February 2018, with researchers spending 6–8 hours daily in each village to ensure broad participation.

Two separate gender FGDs (10-11 participants each) organized in two days for three hours each session. The discussion with the participants explored the various themes of societal norms including the masculinity, the financial burdens and blocking barriers for shouting for the help.

Likewise, a semi organized interview session with selected with community leaders and NGO workers were organized during two weeks, each interview lasted for around one hour. Which has provided the local context specific knowledge, insights and experiences on the practical application of patriarchal norms and the gaps.

Three in four men reported they are privileged for decision making at household level (75%) followed by inheritance of property (70%). However, these benefits come with the substantial cost that 64% of men reported that they avoid to express their pain and burden to keep their masculine intact. Men laugh keeping stones on their hearts" FGD participant 58% believed solving problems independently was a masculine trait. 59% cited stress as primary earners; many worked abroad in hazardous jobs (46%)."I migrated to Qatar because a 'real man' feeds his family. I returned with kidney damage but hide my pain" (Survey respondent, age 38). More than half of the men (55%) mentioned that they engaged in physical fights to prove their masculinity. They were influence to develop such virtue largely from the peer group (51%) and from the fathers (49%). Half of them (50%) viewed the contemporary laws as discriminatory against male when they were reported to become the victims of domestic violence. Likewise, one third (35%) of men reported about the mental health gaps as there is no access to counseling services for men and they were self-stigmatizedfrom seeking help.

The findings of this study shed lights on the complex contrast of the use of patriarchy in the Tharu Community of Nepal that men are reveal the complex duality of patriarchy in the

Tharu community of Nepal, where men concurrently experience the honors and deep defenseless as well. This research contributes to the growing work of literatures challenging the basic idea of patriarchy as solely benefitting men (Connell, 2005), particularly in non-Western contexts.

The unique knowledge of the research was the consistence emotional suppression among participants, with 64% actively conquering the pain to maintain their masculinity intact. This aligns with Levant's (2011) concept of "normative male alexithymia" - the societal conditioning that discourages emotional expression in men. The data reveal a culturally specific expression aligning with the Tharu proverb "Men laugh keeping stones on their hearts" that summarizes these gender specific emotional efforts. Unlike the western contexts where emotional inexpressiveness may be linked to individualism (Addis, 2008), in Nepal's commonality society, this suppression stops from obligations to family and community honor.

The study highlights how patriarchal prospects transform economic delivery into a health hazards. With 59% reporting stress as primary breadwinners and 46% working harmful jobs (often as migrant laborers), our findings corroborate Gurung's (2019) research on Nepali labor migrants. However, the migration is not just an economic strategy but a performance of masculinity. As one participant noted, "A real man feeds his family" even at the cost of personal health. This expands current understandings by showing how local gender norms intersect with global labor markets to create distinct vulnerabilities.

The normalization of violence as masculine (55% engaged in fights to "prove" manhood) reflects what Bourdieu (2001) termed "symbolic violence" the internalization of oppressive norms. While similar patterns exist globally (WHO, 2021), the Tharu context shows unique features: peer groups (51%) and fathers (49%) emerge as primary enforcers of violent masculinity, suggesting intergenerational transmission of norms. This challenges the common assumption that media is the dominant influence on masculine ideals in developing nations.

The study exposes how systemic factors compound these issues. With 50% perceiving legal systems as discriminatory against men and 35% lacking mental health access, Nepal's institutional framework appears to reinforce rather than alleviate patriarchal harms. This finding critically extends Tamang's (2020) work by showing that patriarchal systems fail men not just through cultural norms but through policy gaps. The absence of male-focused services creates a self-perpetuating cycle where men's vulnerabilities remain invisible.

The study suggested that men always has psychic pressure to be an amour of others because they have experienced that the physical structure of manhood is created during the childrearing stage that are symbolized to fulfil the absence of father and other adult male. They were constantly told to become an armor of others in the family members and the society. They hear stories/sayings continue present men as a hero. They believe that there is no one to protect their dependents and they don't trust others. One in three thinks that they don't trust others to become the protectors of others. The majority of men learn from their father and mother continue to teach them to become the protector. They did not find any stories that a brave girl saves a prince, or a man in the history. The film also shows that a boy should protect a girl. 49 percent men and boys consider themselves to be the armor of others,

because they were told to do so for generation. They keep continue to listening and seeing since the childhood.

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Conclusion

This study analyses that the patriarchy does not only harm the women but alsohighlights that the men are pressurized because of the patriarchy. To address thesechallenges and issues, we must move beyond the binary gender structures to developand change the inclusive policies that recognize men's vulnerability withoutovershadowing the women's rights. The futuristic interventions must be prioritizing theculturally grounded, intersectional approaches to masculinities.

The patriarchy a harmful to men and boys, 66 percentages of men and boys express their dissatisfaction of being discouraged from spending time with their children and they miss out the joy of parenting when they say that they spend most of their time during the management of external family and social affairs. Apart from this, 59 express that they have burden of earning and men often leave house for earning outside and many of them has gone abroad for foreign labor, where most of time they have to work in a hazardous working situation (46%).

Most of the men except challenges to look like masculine. They accept many challenges and gone through the difficulties to look like man that is suitable in the patriarchal society. The top three things they do for being a man are accepting and performing heavy workload (70%), undergo through different physical tortures (55%) and get involve in war or fight (54%) even if the anticipated adverse results.

Although men have to bear different challenges, they fear to admit their pain. Wide variations of responses recorded behind this. When analyzed the most common choices, the first one is men's fear of losing their masculinity that 64 percent men and boys believes on this. Likewise, they don't share it because they try to solve their problem on their own (58%) and 46 percent men and boys expressed that the legal provision is discriminatory against men and boys. They believe that the men's violence is accepted in the society.

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