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Red Colour, Widowhood, and the Struggle for Social Citizenship in Nepal: A Qualitative Social Work Inquiry

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Abstract: The current research discusses the Red Colour Movement (Rato Kapada Andolan) in Nepal and its connection to the patriarchal normative structure which consistently excludes the widows from any auspicious indicators of social status. One of the significant signs of this exclusion is the ban on the use of red colour – the colour symbolizing marriage and divine femininity in the Hindu community. This movement can be regarded as a feminist initiative aimed at bringing together the widows and members of civil society to fight the ban on the red and to give the widows their social rights back. Drawing on qualitative in-depth interviews with thirteen purposively selected widowed women in Kathmandu district, the analysis is framed by feminist social movement theory, social justice theory, and social work empowerment frameworks, cross-cut by an intersectional lens attending to caste, class, age, and geography. The results reveal that there have been considerable achievements made in terms of psychological empowerment and disruption of societal norms, but particularly in an urban context, although there is an inherent structural inconsistency associated with such achievements. Women who are economically dependent or who reside in areas not covered by the movement are excluded from this process of transformation. The study suggests that the cultural change achieved symbolically cannot be enough without corresponding legal protection and economic empowerment.

Keywords: Widowhood, Rato Kapada Andolan, Social citizenship, Intersectionality, Decolonising social work.

1. Introduction

1.1 Red Colour, Widowhood, and Social Citizenship

The morning her husband died, a widow in Nepal already knows what she must do. Before relatives arrive, before the body is bathed, she removes the red from her body — the sindoor from her hair parting, the coloured bangles from her wrists, the bright fabric from her shoulders. No one instructs her. She learned this by watching her mother, who learned it by watching hers. This is how symbolic violence works: not through force but through anticipation, through a norm so thoroughly absorbed that the dominated enforce it upon themselves. In Nepal, dress is not clothing. It is a verdict.

Red holds a distinct and powerful place in Hindu cosmology and social life. It is the colour of *sindoor* (vermillion), applied to a married woman's hair parting as a mark of her *suhag* — her auspicious, married status — and worn by the goddess Durga as a symbol of *shakti*, sacred feminine power. Lynn Bennett's (1983) foundational ethnography of high-caste women in Nepal, *Dangerous Wives and Sacred Sisters*, demonstrates that red and other bright colours are constitutive of a wife's ritual status: she is simultaneously the dangerous outsider brought into the husband's lineage and the sacred vessel sustaining family prosperity. When a husband dies, that double status collapses. The widow becomes what Mary Douglas (1966) calls matter out of place as anomalous, polluting, a woman who no longer fits the categories that organise social order. It is imperative that her body is recategorized, and this categorization is done through the ritual of stripping away red.

In Nepal, widowhood not only refers to the state of being of a woman who has lost her husband, but also encompasses the social construction of an identity dictated by religious ideology, caste dictates, and familial coercion (Dhaliwal, 2015; Tamang, 2002). During the Rana period (1846–1951), this identity was enforced through extremes — *sati* (self-immolation on a husband's funeral pyre) for some, and for survivors a form of living death: physical confinement, dietary deprivation, ceremonial exclusion (Dhaliwal, 2015). *Sati* was abolished, and Nepal's 2015 Constitution formally guarantees gender equality. Neither abolished the norm. Bandyopadhyay (2008) and Chowdhry (1998) both show how the regulation of widows' bodies through dress, mobility, and sexuality is structurally constitutive of South Asian patriarchal organisation — not an excess of that system but one of its load-bearing mechanisms. Tarlo (1996) and Entwistle (2000) theorise dress as simultaneously conformity, resistance, and identity construction; the forced adoption of white or drab clothing by widows is what Bourdieu (1984) terms symbolic violence — coercion that presents itself as propriety. Khumalo (2020) extends this to show that dress-based resistance in non-Western contexts is a deliberate challenge to structures of social recognition, which is precisely the claim the Rato Kapada Andolan makes.

Social citizenship, the third key concept, derived from Marshall's (1950) tripartite framework of civil, political, and social rights. Social citizenship is the right to participate fully and equally in the social and cultural life of one's community such as to attend ceremonies, engage in public space, access social networks, be recognised as a full social being. Bell (1997) sharpens this as full and equal participation of all social groups in society's institutions and decisions. For widowed women in Nepal, the denial of red dress is simultaneously a denial of social citizenship. It marks them as ritually excluded from ceremonies, unwelcome in auspicious spaces, and legally unprotected from familial coercion. National Women’s Commission (2011) recorded exclusion from property rights, rituals, and social circles in a systematic manner, yet the extent of severity was not uniform

across different castes. It is shown by Devkota and Bhattarai (2017) that although changes were brought about constitutionally, widows still continue to be excluded in their economic status because of deprivation of inheritance and limited work opportunities, both of which contribute to discrimination on the basis of symbolic attire.

1.2 The Rato Kapada Andolan: Origins, Actors, and Agenda

The Rato Kapada Andolan (Red Colour Movement) is the primary organised feminist collective action targeting dress-based discrimination against widows in Nepal. Its timing is not coincidental. Nepal's post-conflict democratic opening after 2006 which is marked as the end of the Maoist conflict and, the transition to a federal democratic republic produced a period of constitutional renegotiation in which civil society actors were able to advance claims for previously marginalised groups (Acharya & Bennett, 2010). Feminist civil society organisations, already active through the 1990s democratisation, moved into this opening specifically to put widows' rights on the agenda.

The Andolan was formally initiated and institutionally anchored by the Women's Rehabilitation Centre Nepal (WOREC), a feminist NGO with established experience in gender-based violence programming. WOREC's role was catalytic and organisational rather than directive as it convened widow self-help groups across Kathmandu district, ran consciousness-raising workshops, produced advocacy materials, and coordinated with Sancharika Samuha which is a network of women journalists to generate national media coverage of widows' rights (WOREC Nepal, 2014). The organisational model which is NGO-facilitated but widow-led is central to understanding both the movement's achievements and its limits. WOREC's infrastructure is concentrated in Kathmandu. The movement has not built equivalent capacity in peri-urban and rural areas, and this gap maps almost exactly onto which widows the movement has reached and which it has not.

The Andolan's methods combined public demonstration, consciousness-raising, and community-level norm disruption. Joint ceremonies in which widows collectively wore red in public spaces like temples, community halls, wedding venues were its signature tactic. It is a coordinated act of cultural transgression that converted individual deviance into collective assertion. Marches through Kathmandu's public spaces, media campaigns in *Kantipur* and *Nagarik*, and engagement with the National Women's Commission translated symbolic claims into advocacy pressure on state institutions. Red thus functioned as a master frame (McAdam et al., 1988) in which a condensed symbolic action representing a broader constellation of claims to property, ceremonial inclusion, freedom from familial surveillance, and ultimately to the full social citizenship that Marshall (1950) and Bell (1997) describe.

1.3 Feminist Social Movements, Social Work, and Decolonising Practice

According to Molyneux (1998), Practical interests relate to women's immediate needs, whereas strategic interests relate to the need for challenging the ideology behind the oppression. The Andolan is engaged in both practical and strategic interests at the same time because it raises the question about the right of the widow to wear the color red.This dual character also produces the movement's central tension wich means practical gains in dress freedom don't automatically dismantle the structural arrangements that make compliance rational for the most economically vulnerable widows. A widow who fears eviction if she wears red has more than a norm to overcome. Thompson (2002) theorises social movements as integral to social work's emancipatory project. The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW, 2014) global definition frames social work as a practice of social change and collective empowerment, which is precisely what the Andolan enacts, with or without the professional label.

Decolonising social work scholarship (Gray et al., 2013; Mafile'o & Vakalahi, 2016) builds upon this idea, arguing that any form of emancipation in non-Western settings needs to be based on the local tradition and collective actions by locals instead of the foreign Western models. The Andolan exemplifies this. It was led by widows themselves, deployed culturally specific symbolic resources, and emerged from within Nepali civil society. No prior study has examined it through a social work lens — which means the field has been missing one of its own paradigm cases.

1.4 Intersectionality and Differentiated Experience

The prohibition on widows wearing red is not uniform across Nepali society. It is enforced most rigidly among Brahmin and Chhetri communities, where it is grounded in Hindu ritual purity doctrine; among some Dalit communities, where it takes a different form; and with considerably less doctrinal force among Janajati (indigenous nationalities) and Newar communities, where social surveillance operates through informal pressure rather than religious prescription. Crenshaw's (1991) intersectionality framework and Hill Collins' (2000) matrix-of-domination analysis are the right tools here: caste, class, age, and geography each mediate both the severity of discrimination and access to movement resources, producing outcomes that a single-axis analysis cannot capture.

According to Agarwal (1994), the formal rights of women in South Asia are systematically threatened by economic institutions that maintain male domination at home. Chhetri (2019) has observed that Dalit widows are subject to multiple forms of exclusion: while upper-caste widows are subjected to exclusion due to the power of religion, Dalit widows experience exclusion both from caste-Hindu rituals and from economic benefits that have been gained by higher caste women by the efforts of the feminist movement. According to Sharma and Acharya (2021), geography creates a gradient of civil society resource access, which is most strongly felt in case of rural and peri-urban Dalit widows.

In spite of all the Rato Kapada Andolan's decade-long activism, the Andolan has been completely neglected in scholarship. The existing literatures on widowhood in Nepal examine the legal, economic, and health-related issues related to the phenomenon (National Women's Commission, 2011; Devkota & Bhattarai, 2017; Poudel & Carryer, 2000). However, this body of literature does not consider the Andolan as a social movement and its actual achievements or who they have benefited. Social work literature about empowerment and decolonizing social work (Gray et al., 2013; Thompson, 2002) includes no such examples from a non-Western context. Intersectionality literature demonstrates the compounded discrimination and disadvantage experienced by Dalit and rural widows (Chhetri, 2019; Sharma & Acharya, 2021); however, the idea has never been applied to the differential impact of the movement. In any case, the Andolan has remained unexplored, its results have been unassessed, and no research has ever addressed it as a social work issue.

Based on the context, this study asks: how and why did the Rato Kapada Andolan emerge, what agendas has it pursued, and what forms of social justice and social citizenship has it advanced? It makes two contributions: empirical evidence about an under-studied feminist movement in a non-Western context, and a demonstration that grassroots collective action of this kind constitutes macro-level social work practice consistent with decolonising perspectives on emancipatory professional intervention (Gray et al., 2013; Mafile'o & Vakalahi, 2016).

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design, Positionality, and Conceptual Framework

This study uses a qualitative interpretive design grounded in a feminist epistemological orientation. In essence, since the phenomenon being studied, for instance, the lived experiences of being discriminated against based on the mode of dress, transforming consciousness, and what it means to wear red clothes are all subjective and contextual in nature, it was appropriate to use qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researchers are embedded within Nepalese culture. This enabled sensitivity towards the culture as well as language skills and reflexivity at every stage of collecting and analyzing data (Hesse-Biber, 2014).The researchers also observed two Andolan; public events in Kathmandu, enabling triangulation of interview data against observed practice. Sustained analytical attention to non-participants' testimony which means the widows who had not adopted red dress, mitigated over-identification with the movement's advocacy commitments.

The conceptual framework integrates three theoretical pillars cross-cut by an intersectional lens. Feminist social movement theory (Molyneux, 1998; Jayawardena, 1986) frames the Andolan as organised gendered resistance and distinguishes its practical from its strategic agendas, while illuminating the tension between them. Social justice theory (Bell, 1997; Novak, 2000) supplies the normative standard: full and equal social citizenship across all dimensions of social life. Social work empowerment theory (Thompson, 2002; IFSW, 2014) frames grassroots collective

action as macro-level social work practice consistent with decolonising arguments (Gray et al., 2013). These pillars are cross-cut by an intersectional lens (Crenshaw, 1991; Hill Collins, 2000) attending to caste, class, age, and geography. Three mediating mechanisms connect context to outcome as individual cognitive liberation (the shift from norm-acceptance to norm-challenge); collective solidarity (the social power of coordinated dress transgression); and civil society advocacy (NGO-supported outreach and public education). These mechanisms produce outcomes across three domains as recovery of individual dignity and autonomy; community-level norm disruption; and social inclusion through widows' reclaimed participation in public and ceremonial life.

2.2 Setting, Participants, Sampling, and Data Collection

This study was conducted in Kathmandu district which is the primary locus of the Andolan's organisational infrastructure. It also offers variation across central urban and peri-urban environments enabling analysis of geographic unevenness. Thirteen widowed women were selected through purposive sampling (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), supplemented by convenience sampling through WOREC-affiliated self-help group coordinators. Selection criteria required participants to be widowed, resident in Kathmandu district, and aware of the Andolan. Seven of them had adopted red dress following Andolan engagement whereas six had not. Deliberate inclusion of non-adopters enabled analysis of structural barriers to participation.

In this study, caste representation included Brahmin/Chhetri (6), Janajati (4), Newar (2), and Dalit (1). The inclusion of Janajati and Newar participants requires justification, since dress restrictions for widows are less formally codified in these communities than among Brahmin and Chhetri groups. Three reasons governed the decision. First, Kathmandu's ethnic landscape is highly mixed, and the Andolan draws participation from widows across communities, including those who experience informal social surveillance around dress even without doctrinal prescription. Second, Janajati and Newar widows who joined the movement reported awareness of; and in some cases pressure conforming to dominant Brahmin/Chhetri norms in shared urban residential and ceremonial spaces. Third, including participants across caste groups is what the intersectional framework requires as it illuminates how caste position mediates both the severity of discrimination and access to movement resources. The Dalit participant's distinct experience such as enforced through economic precarity rather than religious authority was analytically the most revealing in the sample. Table 1 presents participants by caste group, preserving confidentiality by grouping rather than naming individuals.

Table 1

Participant Profile by Caste Group

Caste Group	N	Age Range	Location	Red Dress (Yes/No)
Brahmin/Chhetri	6	34–64	Urban (5); Peri-urban (1)	Yes: 3; No: 3
Janajati (Tamang, Gurung, Rai, Magar)	4	43–71	Urban (3); Peri-urban (1)	Yes: 3; No: 1
Newar	2	44–48	Urban (1); Peri-urban (1)	Yes: 1; No: 1
Dalit (Pariyar)	1	41	Peri-urban (1)	No: 1
Total	13	34–71	Urban (10); Peri-urban (3)	Yes: 7; No: 6

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted in Nepali, audio-recorded with informed consent, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English. A bilingual research assistant independently back-translated 20% of transcripts; discrepancies were resolved through discussion and analyst triangulation.

A secondary data layer such as WOREC Nepal (2014) documentation, National Women's Commission (2011) reports, and national newspaper coverage provided source triangulation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase procedure as familiarisation, initial coding, theme generation, theme review, theme definition, and write-up. Codes were developed inductively and subsequently interpreted against the conceptual framework. Member checking was conducted with four participants; disconfirming cases particularly non-adopters' testimony challenging the movement's reach and universality are foregrounded throughout the analysis. All participants provided informed consent and were told of their right to withdraw. The study adhered to Nepal Health Research Council standards and the British Sociological Association's Statement of Ethical Practice. Findings should not be generalised beyond Kathmandu especially in rural Nepal, caste-based enforcement is more rigid and civil society reach considerably weaker (Sharma & Acharya, 2021).

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1 Internalised Subordination: The Framework of Prohibition

Across all thirteen interviews, participants described the prohibition on red dress not as an externally imposed rule but as a norm so thoroughly internalised that it had acquired the character of moral self-evidence. Among Brahmin and Chhetri participants, the mechanism of anticipatory socialisation was most explicit as widowhood's script was learned by observing mothers and grandmothers, such that its requirements were already known before anyone enforced them. One Brahmin/Chhetri participant described removing her coloured clothing the morning after her husband's death, before any family member had spoken to her about it. This is what Bourdieu (1984) terms symbolic violence; the imposition of categories of perception that the dominated come to accept as legitimate and natural, so completely that enforcement becomes redundant.

Intersectional variation was sharp. Brahmin participants described rigid caste-enforcement through maternal figures framing the removal of coloured clothing as 'protection' — illustrating how control presented as care recruits widows into their own subordination. Janajati participants generally faced less doctrinally grounded restriction but reported the persistent power of informal surveillance in shared urban spaces as, "Nobody said anything directly, but I felt it. You know when you are not welcome." The Dalit participant described a qualitatively distinct experience, consistent with Chhetri's (2019) documentation of compounded exclusion as dress restriction enforced not through Hindu doctrinal authority but through economic precarity and community gossip. She also lacked access to the widow self-help groups through which most movement participants first encountered the Andolan, because the nearest group met in a locality she could not afford to reach. For Dalit widows, geographic and economic barriers compound caste-based exclusion into a form of triple marginalisation that the movement's urban-centred infrastructure does not reach.

3.2 From Silence to Solidarity: Consciousness and Movement Emergence

Participants who engaged with the Andolan described a shared process of cognitive liberation (McAdam et al., 1988) as a shift from experiencing their condition as inevitable to recognising it as unjust and changeable. This was typically catalysed by specific encounters likely, attending WOREC-organised workshops, meeting red-wearing widows, or media exposure to the movement's public demonstrations. Among participants who had adopted red dress, one Chhetri participant's account is representative,

> There was a woman there, a widow herself wearing a red sari and speaking about rights. I thought that she looks like a full person. And then I thought why don't I? That was the day I started to question everything I had accepted about being a widow.

This illustrates the movement's educative function (Dykstra & Law, 1994) as making visible what had appeared impossible provokes the critical reflection necessary for collective action. Participants who attended joint red-wearing ceremonies consistently emphasised the transformative power of collective over individual resistance. Individual acts of dress transgression could be contained through individualised sanctions; the movement aggregated these acts into coordinated public demonstration, a social fact too large to manage through the same means. WOREC Nepal (2014) confirms that self-help groups provided the primary organisational infrastructure for this consciousness-raising, with group meetings functioning as incubators of individual and collective agency before their translation into public action.

3.3 Agendas and Achievements: Rights, Recognition, and Social Citizenship

The movement's agenda extended well beyond dress. Red functioned as a master frame (McAdam et al., 1988) which is a condensed symbolic action representing a broader constellation of claims. A Janajati participant put it plainly as, "Red meant I am still here. I have the right to go to my daughter's wedding. I have the right to be invited. The colour was the door, behind it was everything we had been denied." The red dress condensed widows' claims to full social participation; to what Marshall (1950) terms social citizenship, and Bell (1997) frames as the equal participation of all groups in social institutions and decisions, into a single legible act of cultural resistance.

Participants who had adopted red dress described consistent gains as recovery of personal agency, reconstruction of positive social identity, and the capacity to engage critically with previously fixed norms (Thompson, 2002). One Newar participant described the first occasion she wore red clothing after joining the movement as,

> The first time I wore a red kurta after joining the movement, I was shaking. But when I walked out and nobody stopped me, something broke open inside me. I thought that I have been afraid of a colour. And then I was not afraid anymore. Everything changed after that day.

The act of wearing red was simultaneously the expression of emerging agency and the instrument of its further consolidation as each time without consequence making the next time easier. At the community level, those involved in central Kathmandu noted the gradual changes in attitude in the young ones, as observed in WOREC Nepal evaluation reports (2014). This is rather indicative of the change in norms and not representative of the same since, from their descriptions, the attitudinal change seems to be limited to their social network within the movement and not the attitudes of the community at large. Social citizenship, as defined by Bell (1997), has developed among some of these widows reached by the movement.

3.4 Structural Barriers: Economic Dependency, Geography, and Legal Gaps

Three structural barriers consistently limited the movement's reach. The first is familial economic coercion. Among non-adopters, economic dependency on adult sons or male relatives was the most frequently cited constraint. One elderly Brahmin/Chhetri participant's account makes the structural logic explicit,

> My son controls the house. If I wore red and he told me to leave, where would I go at sixty-one? This is not weakness, it is mathematics. Rights are real only if you can afford to claim them. I cannot afford to claim mine.

This clearly proves Agarwal's (1994) theory in which she states that the formal rights enjoyed by women in South Asia are compromised by the economic system where there is maintenance of male dominance in the household. This is in accordance with the findings of Devkota and Bhattarai (2017), whereby denial of inheritance was found to be the major factor limiting constitutional rights.Claiming the right to red may cost them their housing.

The second barrier is geographic unevenness. Peri-urban participants consistently reported that the Andolan had not reached their localities. One peri-urban Newar participant, stopped at the temple gate twice for wearing red, said simply that, "Here, the movement has not arrived yet." The Dalit participant had no entry point into movement networks due to transport costs, a barrier Sharma and Acharya (2021) document as structurally widespread beyond municipal boundaries. Without deliberate outreach investment, the movement cannot reach the widows facing the most severe compounded disadvantage.

The third barrier lies in the lack of a legally-binding safeguard. There is no legal clause in Nepal that prevents discrimination based on clothing and protects widows from family compulsion. The issue was highlighted thoroughly by National Women's Commission (2011), and Poudel and Carryer (2000) explain that without any implementation of the law, the constitutional gender-equality clauses in Nepal remain mere ideals.The movement's gains are contingent on cultural change. They are not guaranteed by law. This fragility is most consequential for those widows whose economic circumstances make cultural tolerance the difference between safety and homelessness.

3.5 The Andolan as Macro Social Work Practice

The Rato Kapada Andolan is macro-level social work practice as it mobilises collective resources and community solidarity to challenge structural injustice (Thompson, 2002; IFSW, 2014). Its indigenous, community-led character through deploying culturally specific symbolic resources, emerging from widows' own experience, facilitated rather than directed by NGO infrastructure exemplifies the decolonised social work practice Gray et al. (2013) and Mafile'o and Vakalahi's (2016) argument must be recognised rather than supplanted by imported Western frameworks. The differentiation between personal empowerment and structural change made by Thompson (2002) is very significant in this context. Empowerment

through individual courage, without having legal and economic security, only perpetuates the existing inequalities that need to be addressed. The widows who are economically independent and socially connected in urban areas are able to assert their rights of being red. The social workers' role is to make sure that this change is secured structurally.

4. Conclusion

The Rato Kapada Andolan reveals a structural pattern that feminist theory predicts but qualitative evidence rarely traces this precisely as the widows who benefit most from a movement challenging their subordination are those already least dependent on the structures being challenged. For widows with economic independence and urban social networks, wearing red is now a claimable right. For those without like Dalit widows, peri-urban widows, economically dependent widows, it remains a risk too costly to take. This is not a limitation of the movement's ambition. It is what intersectionality theory means in practice that when caste marginalisation, economic dependency, and geographic isolation intersect, symbolic change operating on one axis at a time cannot reach the people at the intersection (Crenshaw, 1991).

Theoretically, this study makes two contributions to social work discipline. First, it establishes that the Andolan constitutes a legitimate form of macro-level decolonised social work practice, not only theory applied to context but practice that emerged from context, led by the people it concerns, deploying culturally specific resources that imported frameworks would not have produced (Gray et al., 2013; Mafile'o & Vakalahi, 2016). Second, it provides empirical grounding for Thompson's (2002) distinction between personal empowerment and structural transformation as empowerment without legal protection and economic security is contingent rather than durable, accessible to those with the resources to claim it and unavailable to those who most need it. Symbolic cultural change, however genuinely difficult to achieve, cannot substitute for the enforceable rights and economic security that make social citizenship (Marshall, 1950; Bell, 1997) real for all widows, not only for those the movement has already reached. Future research should track whether the norm disruptions produced by the Andolan consolidate beyond the movement's organisational presence and whether participatory research designs that position Dalit and rural widows as co-researchers can both strengthen the evidence base and enact the decolonising commitments the field claims.

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