

Assessing the Role of Social Stigma in Relation to the Concept of Social Inclusion and Exclusion

Sachita Sharma Dhakal¹

Abstract

Every society has some sort of hierarchy, division or categories. Some underlies within the structures of society, while others are created by the members of the society. Stigma is an unavoidable side of human society where ideal, division and discrimination-less society is just an imagination. This article argues that stigma in various form is generated, accepted in group, and becomes “common mind” to isolate any “other”, offering unequal distribution of opportunity and subjected to the social exclusion. It becomes matter of “we” and “other” and still left silence to become public concern.

Key Words:

Stigma, common mind, other, discrimination, social exclusion, social acceptance

Introduction

Evring Goffman, in his book, *Notes on Management of spoiled Identity* (1963) defines stigma as “the situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance” (1990:9). Why this is hidden and does not become public talk and often remains unexpressed? Is it embedded within social structure or it is created by the members of the particular society? This research aims to find out the answers to these questions.

Stigma is commonly found in every society and culture. It is socio-cultural fact. However, it differs in relation to geographical features, color of skin, culture, personality, religion, deformity, education level and many other factors. As it varies in number of ways, understanding stigma depends largely on the social context and relationship. Stigma in simplest form can be understood as categorization of undesired differences. Goffman states, “stigma is equivalent to an undesired difference”. Goffman further suggests that all human differences are potentially stigmatizable. Stigma is a degrading attitude of a society or a group towards a person or a particular group which sets such group apart. Stigma thus, creates negative approach towards the person.

Stigma is a social reality and it is not avoidable. Everyone can easily stigmatize when shifted to different social context. An individual who is “desired” within his social setting may experience “undesired” stigmatization in a distinct society. Stigmas reflect the values and judgment of the dominant group, which has a power to define differences as desired and

¹ Lecturer at Koteswor Multiple Campus

undesired. To be clear, stigma is a powerful social construction which segregates groups or individual with some discrediting differences. To understand how and why stigma persist in society it is important to understand how stigma originated and continued to exist in society from past to present.

Stigma and Identity Construction

Human differences are natural differences among people, which is the basis for stigma. A person may sometimes get into the world with stigma and sometimes get stigmatized in the later phase of life. The value judgment created by particular group or individual assumes some traits favorable while rest of other avoidable. The one who holds the power as majority group determines desirable traits and undesirable. It creates male and female stereotype and links women with beauty. Women identity is related to the physical feature and less to the qualification. Women who don't fit the beauty level that is averaged in society are commonly stigmatized.

Naomi wolf in her book *The Beauty Myth* writes “Women’s labor for beauty, and the evaluation of women as beauties rather than as workers, issue women each day with metaphors of the real economic injustices that apply to them in the workplace” (56). People are segregated due to the physical structure, color of skin and beauty. It is linked with the personality and identity. Stigma then is a construction of identity by the dominant group on the basis of relative comparison and segregation. Stigma often creates negative identity of the person or group, as the word “stigma” originally refers branding of certain people to avoid or exile.

The identity attached with stigma gets fluctuate. The society which holds negative attitude towards particular individual or group may be accepted easily in another group. Thus, the construction of identity differs in the shift of social context .If a person from rural part visits city he/she may be subjected to stigma. The language, education level, apparel creates undesired differences among urban people but it is commonly accepted within his/her area. Similarly, a girl from Muslim community wearing scarf in a public school can be stigmatized because it does not follow the uniformity but at the same time becomes normal or even ideal to the religious Muslim schools. Therefore, value or judgment which determines identity changes moving from one social context to another.

Stigmatization is a powerful social tool because it is constructed by culture, social institution, group or individual to create human differences underlying within a society. These human differences create such identity which is accepted as a social fact and subjected to rejection, avoidance and denigration.

Poverty, Discrimination and Social Exclusion

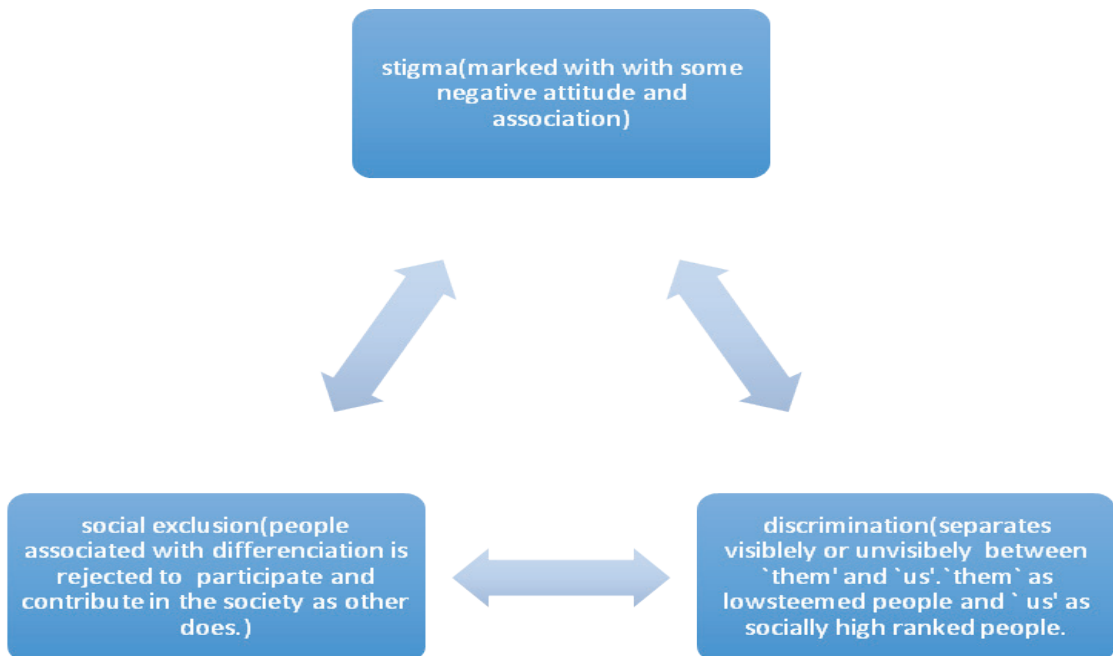
Poverty is barrier; poor people are visible among other. It creates gap between people .Poor people are stigmatized and are not provided equal opportunity in social

participation .They have no access to education and carrier development, so they remain stigmatized.

Poverty is the state of being without power. Money or material achievements are linked to the power exercise. Poor people are identified in public by their outer appearance including clothes, shoes, food, gadgets, residence, and standard of living. Being poor, they are expected to perform secondary role in society. They are not counted to the main stream population. The status of beggars, homeless people living in extreme poverty line is often stigmatized but poverty itself is a relative term. One who may not be stigmatized out of poverty may easily get stigmatized in another social context, among the aristocrats.

In addition, discrimination is commonly practiced in every kind of society. Discrimination, social exclusion and stigma are closely interrelated. With regard to relationship and human behavior, social exclusion refers to act of rejecting someone from interpersonal interactions. It may be intentionally harmful or not, but referring to stigma, social exclusion is considered to be a form of relational aggression .The negative responses of the society to the particular traits or behavior is stigmatization.

To understand the link between stigma, social exclusion and discrimination, the following analysis has been illustrated:



Gender, Feminism and Stigma

Stigma prevails in every society whether developed or not, but it becomes more pathetic when it falls on women who are still struggling for equality and equal position in

society. Females who fall prey to the stigmas are double oppressed one. Female is subjected to stigma if she is anti-feminine in her nature or structure. Females with uncommon height, body weight, voice, face are regarded as humiliating.

Judith Butler in her essay *Bodies that Matters* says “Thus, the question is no longer, How is gender constituted as and through a certain interpretation of sex? (A question that leaves the "matter" of sex un-theorized), but rather through what regulatory norms is sex itself materialized? And how is it that treating the materiality of sex as a given presupposes and consolidates the normative conditions of its own emergence?” (10). Rosemarie Garland-Thomson in her essay, *Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory* links feminism and disability theory and says “the goal of feminist disability theories, “is to augment the term and comfort the limits of the ways we understand human diversity, the materiality of the body, multiculturalism, and the social formation that interpret bodily differences”. Females should fit to the expectation of the female definition existing in the particular society. Feminism opposes patriarchy construction of femaleness and denies the stereotype performance. Once feminism was a good label and nowadays it has been stigmatized and altered to genocide. From the first phase of feminism to the recent days the actual meaning of feminism is difficult to understand that is, the universal definition of feminism is far too complex. Gerda Lerner defines feminist conscious in the following extracts:

“I define feminist consciousness as the awareness of women that they belong to subordinate group; that their condition of subordination is not natural, but it is socially determined; that they must join with other women to remedy these wrongs; and finally they must and can provide an alternative vision of societal organization in which women as well as men will enjoy autonomy and self-determination. (14)”

Nowadays, the notion of “Feminism” has been linked with negative attributes. Feminist are stigmatized. Feminism has some sort of deep annoying notion and many female supporting feminism hesitate to alien in it. Unlike many other movements, feminism arose in due course of human civilization but feminist are stigmatized to fit to as man-hating stereotypes, as a revolutionist, self-centered and beyond the social norms and values. Feminists echo their voices in favor of equal pay, equal rights, justice and protested domestic violence, patriarchy and domestic violence.

Disability, Mental Illness and Challenge to Social Justice

Disability is the term used for those who are below the so-called average normal standards. A person with no physical injuries, disease or imputation is a normal common person whereas, person lacking perfect body is called “disable”. Disability is thus, linked with some sort of weakness or fault in doing. It is associated with the performance of the person. One fears of being disable because it is a kind of curse, difficulty which is hard to handle. They are excluded from a mass into a category of disable person. They are

stigmatized and are expected to remain passive in public.

One of the common features in disability is its uncertain nature; a normal person can turn into a disabled person due to unpredicted accidents, diseases or disaster. Furthermore, disability is an inevitable part of human life, every human being gets disabled at one stage of his life, disease or ageing reduce human ability to function well.

Mental health is equally important as physical health. In our society people with mental illness are mistreated. They are excluded, stigmatized and are away from different opportunities. Mentally retarded persons are caged and kept away from public. They are stigmatized and are associated with curse or evil spirit. It is very hard to get treatment and care for those passing through mental illness, even family may not take proper care of these people. They are separated from friends, family or work place.

The law provides clear provision of rights for disabled or mentally ill persons. However, as stigma is associated with social behavior and thought, legal provision does not bring change in attitude. Stigma is hidden and is embedded in socio-cultural structure.

Jhamak Ghimire's *Jiwan Kanda Ki Phul* : An Exemplification

Jhamak Ghimire presents a grim picture of Nepali society where traditional values and assumptions have created barriers and stigma for a woman with physical disability. It is her own experience of being stigmatized in her own family and society where she was never thought equal among able-bodied people.

Jhamak Ghimire was born with cerebral palsy, her bones were too weak to hold an object or move but her legs were strong. She can't speak but listen, think and understand. She struggled hard to achieve basic similar treatment in her family. This book presents her continuous fight within herself and the outside world. How her desire to learn alphabets and gaining education was thought to be far from her level, she was considered to be a burden for the family members, some even prayed for her early death as an easy way to escape from the hardship to run her daily life. Many people thought that it was a curse attached to her fate but none of them tried to understand what the little voiceless girl really wanted to do in her life.

She was not cared properly, actually nobody had time to look after her, unproductive fellow with a hopeless future, to give her food and to dress her was just enough for her rearing. People used to look at her with fear, pity, curiosity and sympathy. She was stigmatized within her family, community and beyond that.

Even after when she got formal education and became a well-known writer of her book she was expected to seek favor on the basis of her impairment. She was noticed more because of her different body rather than her different approach by many of her contemporary critics and the people assisted her however she denied accepting pitiful eyes on her writing. Jhamak says in her book "I encountered with the social and political pressure to accept

different ideology to speak on their favor but I being a women of my own identity regularly projected my disagreement on the socio-religious structure of the Nepalese society".

Caste system as a Social Barrier in Nepal

Caste system is one of the social barriers prevailing in Nepalese society. It is an abstract stigmatization where people is excluded and ignored because of the caste origin. Caste system is permanent stigma where specific caste groups are stigmatized as "Untouchable" .

The caste system builds a top-down hierarchy in society. People are classified into higher caste and lower caste .Lower caste people are not given equal chance in the social participation, they have limited role to perform, whereas higher caste people defines their role and responsibility in society themselves.

As Nepal is the country of ethnic diversity, there are multiple ethnic group and caste system intertwined within a social group. The intensity of social rejection on the basis of caste system also varies according to the region , education level ,economic background and role played by particular caste people in the society .The stigma of "untouchables" associates with negative attitude and social exclusion .The single caste system sharing similar kind of language ,religion ,values and ideologies have several steps of caste system, which creates distinction and differentiation within same socio-cultural group .

Although the constitution of Nepal provides equal rights to every citizen, but in practice, caste system is commonly accepted as a social respect and as a symbol of prestige and in some unfortunate cases as stigma. Rural areas are highly affected by caste system where a person assumed as low caste is often victimized of stigma. They are deprived of basic rights .They are often neglected, mistreated, humiliated and resulted to physical and mental assault. The stigmatized lower caste people are given secondary role and position in society. They are not allowed to enter in high caste society.

The people marked with untouchables are not allowed to take water from same sources; they are commonly restricted to participate in religious function. In some extreme conditions, they are restricted to the access of education and suitable career building. In Terai region specific minority caste people are stigmatized as lower caste, for example, 'Musahars', and 'Kusundas' are treated as poor, weak and illiterate while "Badhis" are taken as sex traders and are sexually exploited.

The administration and other social institution has not paid heed to such difficulties triggered by the complex networks of caste system and thus, stigmatization due to caste system is alive in Nepalese society.

Conclusion

Stigma is an identifiable spot in the society. It is found in every society, and in many societies, it has been accepted as having cultural and social value. People who are

easily accepted in one society can be stigmatized in another society. Thus, stigma is relative concept .It include visible and invisible differences, which exclude a person from his/her own community.

It creates barrier structuring wall among themselves .Stigma is the result of physical differences or mental differences. It can also be social and cultural. Stigma brings self humiliation which avoids the person to take part in social gathering and upholding social responsibilities. People have negative attitude towards stigma, it is a fear-factor that keeps the stigma still existing in society.

Caste system is a particular stigma found in Nepali society which accepts hierarchal system. It is a social evil and stands opposite to the fundamental human rights. However, it is the bitter reality of many societies, which assumes stigma as a natural and usual segregation .Stigma is found more rigid in a closed societies than in open societies. Effective provision should be applied for reducing gap between people. Various awareness campaigns and educational program provide wide understanding of self and other, which could assist in accepting and assimilating within different people and cultures.

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