

EXCLUSION OF MADHESHI WOMEN IN DECISION MAKING

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Abstract

A country's socio-economic growth cannot take place if half of its population is down-trodden. In Nepal women of every section of society are excluded in one or other form. The identity of woman comes from her own family and decision-making autonomy also should start from the household. This article is concerned with the decision-making autonomy of the Madheshi women in Parsa district. The findings reveal that still these women are almost excluded from the structure of decision making autonomy within the households. It may be argued that the status of Madheshi women is poorer due to low education and employment, low exposure of women and less decision making autonomy.

Key words

Exclusion; Inclusion; decision-making; discrimination; autonomy

Introduction

The Terai-Madhesh constitutes more than 50% of the total population of Nepal. Nepalese society is divided into two major categories- Indo Aryan and Tibeto Burman. Most of the previous studies on the status of Nepali women have concluded that Gender roles are less stratified in Tibeto Burman than in Indo- aaryan groups. The women of occupational castes in the Indo- Aryan groups however enjoy considerable freedom both within and outside the family. The women of the Tibeti-Burman community not only enjoy equal status in the household, they also hold more power and authority than their men. It is also seen that women of Hill-ethnic-tribal

and occupational castes are granted a higher degree of public mobility by their respective cultures and traditions. In Hindu community, a high caste groups, gender roles are much more stratified because of their religious prescription for "women's subordination under men" and a cultural based on a strict 'patrilineal inheritance system' and a strict traditional belief "purity of the female body". These women of high castes strictly follow these rules and regulation under the social system and they also get social prestige by following these things. They are hardly go outside and allow only controlled and regulated mobility (Aacharya and Bennet 1981).

Even though, Nepal is a nation where many ethnic groups, men, women including Madheshi women with their multiple socio-cultures, religions and languages, but it has been obviously excluded and are politically dominated by hill origin rulers. These all reflects well in the education, administration, economy, judiciary-national legislation and police-army. . In Nepal there are many programs but there is still lacking gender sensitive programs which can address the excluded groups so that they can participate in development processes.

Madheshi women are backward than other Pahadi communities women because of restricted equality and discriminatory recognition. It has also increased voices from Madheshi people that they have not got respect, proper identity by the state. The policy is still weak. It has not address properly to all women of Nepal. The programs come for the name of disadvantaged groups, generally conduct in the headquarters. There is lacking of monitoring of the related institutions. Similarly lack of local governance, especially representative of municipalities or District Development Committee, many programs are not running properly. The mentality of even well educated people is also very conservative. They still do not want to send their daughters or any female members of their families for work or for the higher education outside of the village or city. Such deprivation/exclusion has created unequal access to food, education and health care, limited opportunities to earn incomes, limited access to resources etc. Such situation and circumstances directly has created many forms of gender, caste-based discrimination against Madheshi women and indirectly has made them to survive in their traditional, cultural, and religious and superstition value added thought and beliefs deep rooted in rural areas of Madhesh. In this context H. Gurung has expressed reality of exclusion problems deep rooted in culture, economy and political sector of feudal government and thus conceptualized the

agendas for inclusion in terms of regional autonomy, proportional representation in every sphere of national life first time for the Madheshi community through the Social Inclusion Research Scheme of SNV in Nepal (SIRF, 2010).

In Nepalese context, the Madheshi women as being on the lowest rung of caste hierarchy are deprived from the accessibility of these different types of capital, symbolic, economic, cultural except the social capital i.e. network of family and kinship. Due to the gendered ideology, women are not even benefited as male members of the group that causes the personal level capability of deprivation. However, the issue of inclusion of Madheshi communities has been raised by many INGOs/NGOs but situation of both men and women of Madheshi castes are poorer than Hill-originated caste/ethnic groups (UNDP, 2012).

In Nepal discrimination against women exists across the country in general which is the worst in the context of madhesh (Terai). The women of Madheshi community have been treated as symbol of izzat (prestige, symbol of status), but rarely does this translate into autonomous decision-making and personal agency. In general they are suffering in the name of dowry, preference of a son, witchcraft, lower status etc in male dominant society's and this has resulted female infanticide, which is growing alarmingly and poor literacy status among girls, usually drop out after their primary school. Dowry is widespread with education only reinforcing the practice and hiking up the rates for grooms. Widows are treated as sinners and deprived of the most basic human dignity, and a premium is placed on women being confined to homes. Early marriages, poor socio-economic status, dependency, low level of literacy rates are the common characteristics have seen in the Madhesh (NWC, 2067 BS).

The UN (1995) defines the status of women in the context of their access to knowledge,

economic resources and political powers as well as their personal autonomy in the process of decision making. The status of women can also be determined by comparing their situation such as the corresponding situation among men and women and the autonomy of decision making at the household level.

In Nepal when the Nepalese women's status in this light, the picture is generally black. The proportion of women involved autonomously in social and public activities is extremely less. Women are underprivileged, underrepresented and exploited in all spheres of society. Socio-cultural, political, economic and educational factors have forced them to live subjugation by men (NWC, 2010).

The Madheshi people, throughout the history, have struggled to maintain their group identity, languages, traditional beliefs, worldviews and ways of life, and the control of their lands, territories and natural resources. Madheshi Community is defined as one of the umbrella of social groups representing regional based discrimination, composing more than sixty ethnic and caste groups including Adibashi/Janjati, Dalit, and Muslim with variation in language, culture, customs and religion integrating them by their common feature of non-hill origin and deprived of their identity. This community has been extremely marginalized and excluded in all spheres such as politics, economy, civil service, education, police-military etc and human development dimensions ranging from their identity in their own land to livelihood strategies (Chaudhary, 2008).

In patriarchal society, where the supremacy of men in every aspect of society and family-life and men are recognized as the guardian and family authority in decision-making. In such society, one sided ruling of men exists in economic, social life and also in political arena. Motherhood, which is an enriching experience for many women and a key component of their self identification often, becomes a terrible burden for women under

current societal pressure. Too often young girls who are not yet ready for marriage are forced into marriage and early motherhood. Many women cannot even decide for themselves when and how many children to have, choice of contraception etc. This denied of control over her own body even leads her to hate her identity as a woman for want of any prospect of escape from her operation (Singh, 2000).

Gentleness, sacrifice, unassertiveness and often- feminine qualities are encouraged in a girl child. Decision making, ability of self - expression, opinion formulation and assertion of their needs and interest are mostly discouraged (Chaudhary et.al, 2008). The social status depends on power and respect inside the household and also outside of the household. Similarly many GOs as well as I/NGOS have been also tried to bring the issue of Madheshi women. But unfortunately none of them raised the issue of women of the same society seriously, whose condition is more painful and vulnerable than men of the same societies and female of other communities. There were gap in qualitative as well as quantitative data on this issue. In this context the research article examines decision-making status among Madheshi women.

The status of women in the household is one of the most important indicators of women empowerment. The identity and status of a woman come from her own family and decision-making autonomy also should start from the household. This paper focuses on decision making autonomy of Madheshi women in household activities.

Method

The information presented in this paper is a part of research (Tiwari, 2013). Both quantitative and qualitative information were collected from a sample of 350 currently married madheshi women of age group 15-49 belonging to different ethnic groups of Parsa district. Systematic random sampling technique was

used to select sample from 10 clusters of VDCs and wards of Birgunj municipality from Parsa district of Nepal. Sample size of each listed clusters was determined following Population Proportionate sampling (PPS) technique. Interview and focused group discussion tools were used to collect information. The data have been analyzed using descriptive method of research.

Results and discussion

Women's decision-making capacity and their presence and participation in decision-making-within the family, community, in public, at work, and in decision-making bodied, whether institutional or political are an important indicator of women empowerment and their autonomy. The information collected using questionnaire about decision-making autonomy among Madheshi women of different caste/ethnic groups have been presented in Table 1.

Table 1 reveals that nearly 29 percent of the respondents reported that they take decision about the small household purchases whereas about 5 percent women take decision to have number of children in their respective households. The table demonstrates that nearly 71 percent of the respondents reported that they take decision jointly. In contrary to this about 44 percent of the respondents reported that they jointly decide to take care of their health.

About 63 percent of the respondents reported that decisions regarding the expenditure of money earned by the respondents were made by them jointly with their husband, with another decisions regarding expenditure of money earned by the respondent's husband were made by them both jointly accounted 47 percent. About 7 percent of the decisions related with expenditure of income either earned by the respondents or their husbands and also expenditure of large items at households, took by the respondents. Thus, most of the decisions related to household are taken their husbands only.

Generally women go outside by taking permission from the in-law-family members or from their husbands. However large proportion of the respondents mentioned that they decide jointly for going outside of the house. Similarly decisions regarding the number of children and own health care, both respondents and their husbands jointly take decisions. It means very small proportion of women take household decision and thus has very low decision-making autonomy.

Focus group discussions were held with the madheshi women during the study which reveals that the socio-economic status in the family is very poor. Most of them have been excluded in important decisions of household matters. However, Dalit and Janjati women expressed that there is less demand of dowry in their caste than others.

Table 1: Percentage showing decision making autonomy status

S. No.	Status Statements	Decision taken by				Total
		Husband	Wife	Jointly	others	
1.	Use of money earned by wife	22.0	7.7	63.1	7.1	100.0
2.	Use of money earned by husband	35.7	5.7	47.1	11.4	100.0
3.	Large household purchases	22.0	7.4	54.9	15.7	100.0
4.	Small household purchases	14.0	28.6	46.6	10.9	100.0
5.	Visit to the relatives or friends	22.0	6.9	52.6	18.6	100.0
6.	Number of children to have	11.1	5.4	71.4	12.0	100.0
7.	Care of own health	31.1	9.4	43.7	15.7	100.0

Conclusion

Madheshi women are disadvantaged in many areas of social and regional activities which have affected their overall status in the respective society. They are largely immaterial in determining household decisions related to domestic and organizational matters. Investment for women empowerment seems to be the single most important way to higher productivity for society as a whole. The whole Madheshi community movement is limited to advocacy level and it should focus on the agenda to improve economic status of Madheshi community as well. The GOs, INGOs, NGOs and other stakeholders should concentrate on women empowerment especially awareness programs and income generating activities.

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