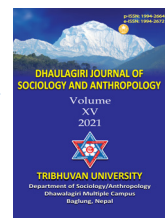


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## Men and Feminism in Nepal

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## Abstract

This paper narrates the experience and interpretation of feminism among 15 men students and graduates of a Gender Studies program in Nepal. It analyzes the benefits men report they have enjoyed and challenges they faced in engaging with feminism. It further discusses the strategies they employed to mitigate the challenges they faced when upscaling personal engagement in feminism. Finally, it reflects on how such engagements could be inserted into the program.

*Keywords:* feminism, feminist consciousness, patriarchy, women's studies

## Introduction

Men's engagement in feminism and the feminist movement has increased substantially in recent decades (Peretz 2017, p. 526). Though few in number, men have engaged with and contributed to the feminist movements throughout history. Men's engagement, in particular, was largely limited to their supports for women's equal rights. Men's support for women's rights continues today (Kimmel, 1987). For feminism to thrive, changing the hearts and minds of men is necessary while keeping women's experiences at the center (Barber and Kretschmer, 2013, p. 44). Sircar (2015), on the other hand, has also cautioned that "it might mark the moment of triumph for feminism that it has now got men on board, or it might be that fatalistic moment of defeat, appropriated and colonized by men (p. 44)."

Some women could perceive men-in-feminism as "a threat to an ideology that uniquely empowers women in a patriarchal society" (Schmitz & Haltom, 2017, p. 279). The study of gender has traditionally been dubbed a "women's issue" and is popularly believed to exclude men (Kimmel, 1987). Many feminists, nonetheless, believe that men's engagement in feminism is necessary to dismantle patriarchy and achieve gender equality. Therefore, as Katz (2006) argues, getting men involved in

feminist agendas also implies making and holding them responsible and encouraging men to recognize the links between masculinity and sexism. On the other hand, as Katz (2006) notes, it then becomes essential to deliberate on how, and under what conditions, could men become effective participants and allies to feminism. It is, clearly, a key question that women feminists should engage with.

The feminist conclusion that patriarchy subordinates and oppresses women at various levels and intensities (Walby, 1990) led millions of women around the globe to embrace feminism. Since then, the main feminist agenda has been geared to weaken and ultimately dismantle patriarchy to ensure gender equality. The first and foremost task of feminism to dismantle patriarchy had been to identify and develop various spaces across which patriarchy can be ascertained, scrutinized, and challenged. Gender Studies is one such space. It was primarily introduced by feminists globally and in Nepal as an extension of Women's Studies that has been an outcome of women's movement (Ruth, 1990) in many parts of the world.

Many feminist academics, while teaching Women's Studies, came to realize that feminism must ascertain, scrutinize and challenge patriarchy in all its forms to weaken and dismantle it. Such realization led them to accept that men also are victims of patriarchy (Hooks, 2000) and, men, women and sexual and gender minorities should struggle collectively to achieve the end goal of ensuring



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gender equality. There were different ways to achieve the goal. One such way has been through pedagogy. It, then, laid the groundwork for Gender Studies.

### **Framing the Context**

Gender Studies was introduced as a graduate program at Tribhuvan University, Nepal, in 2009. Women's Studies had been introduced there as a post-graduate diploma program in 1996. Like in other parts of South Asia during the 1990s and early 2000s, Women's Studies was running successfully in Nepal. The impact of the Women's Studies program was very positive (Mishra, 2017, p. 2003). However, unlike in Women's Studies, where all of the students were women, Gender Studies is a gender-inclusive program and all genders, women, men and sexual and gender minorities enroll there. One of the key reasons for the introduction of Gender Studies was to fulfill the wider social demands that called for expanding scholarship on women and the other genders among all, men, women and sexual and gender minorities. It was a historic shift.

Like in other parts of the world in the 1980s and 1990s, the Gender Studies program in Nepal was built primarily on Women's Studies. By the time Women's Studies was introduced in 1996, a few departments in the Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu were discussing how to make the courses of study more gender sensitive and teaching dedicated courses on gender. One such department, the Central Department of Sociology and Anthropology, later introduced an optional course on gender in 1999. It was thought that Gender Studies ensured men's involvement in feminism by means of inclusive pedagogy. A historic shift, however, demanded a reconceptualization of the scholarship itself in as much as Gender Studies should be able to realize varied needs, interest and concerns of women, men and sexual and gender minorities. It was not something that could be easily or immediately accomplished. The program did not adequately address the needs and concerns of all students, particularly men and sexual and gender minorities. Men and sexual and gender minorities, therefore, had varied concerns on the nature and design of courses, the way the courses were taught, the questions that were raised, the sex of teachers, and the number of men and sexual and gender minorities among the students and members of faculty, etc. Most of the students have reacted that both the conceptualization and implementation of Gender Studies remain to realize and reflect their interests.

Women's Studies teachers, including myself, were motivated to run Gender Studies, because we could see that it was possible to enroll not only women but also men and sexual and gender minorities in the program. We initially thought that including other genders and adding a few courses on Men's Studies and sexual and gender minorities were adequate to implement a program on Gender Studies. These were appropriate steps toward

inclusivity, but the faculty members did not realize that it was an inadequate response. We should have realized early on that Gender Studies is about the lives, interests and concerns of women, men and sexual minorities, unlike Women's Studies that exclusively focus on women's lives (Ruth, 1990) or focus exclusively on women's points of view. We, to be honest, failed in this aspect. When I now attempt to put the pieces together, I come to the conclusion that it is time to re-conceptualize the new scholarship on gender.

### **Identifying and Meeting Gaps**

There remains a notable lack of understanding surrounding how men navigate their engagement with studying feminism and gender and how the nuances of their experience affect their social worlds (Schmitz & Haltom, 2017, p. 279). Some writings suggest that the outcome of their engagement has not necessarily been positive. In contrast, men's commitment to feminism and subscription to feminist principles may decrease after completing a women's studies course (Thomsen, Basu & Reinitz 1995). Therefore, more research is required to understand how men specifically shape their reconceptualization of gendered issues and attachments to feminism (Schmitz & Haltom 2017, p. 279). Empirical evidence of men's experiences with feminism and their interpretation, however, remains rare (Peretz, 2017). It was part of the feminist academics' responsibility to understand men's perspective on feminism and bring to light their perspective as an important component of social knowledge. In addition, understanding men's role in feminism was salient because feminism principally advocates gender equality. A sustained engagement of men with feminism eases the journey toward the goal of feminism. This paper is an attempt to participate in this journey.

In this paper, I basically try to answer the following four questions: (a) How do men students and graduates experience and interpret feminism? (b) What benefits do they derive from engagement with feminism? (c) What are the challenges they face during and following this engagement?, and (d) What strategies do they suggest to increase men's engagement with feminism? The objective all along, of course, is to become better prepared to design the curriculum and other pedagogical frameworks of Gender Studies.

### **Method**

This paper is primarily based on interviews, focus group discussions and classroom discussions with 15 male students and recent graduates of the Gender Studies department, Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu over a period of five years. Pseudo names have been used to maintain privacy. As it is clear, the data was acquired over a rather long period and mostly informally. On the other

hand, I have cultivated the habit of asking each batch of men students to submit written answers to the questions noted in the preceding paragraph. The men I interviewed are educated, urban, and members of “higher” caste groups and relatively well-off families. The data, as such, comes with considerable slants and limitations. Nonetheless, amidst the rarely available empirical data on men’s experiences with feminism globally (Peretz, 2017) and in Nepal, I believe the data has a significant value.

Those interviewed were between the ages of 20 and 40. One of them was in the late 50s. Most of them were unmarried, while a few were married with children. In terms of ethnicity, an overwhelming majority belong to the “high caste” groups, followed by “ethnic” groups, including the Newar. There was no Madeshi and Dalit representation among the interviewees. Indeed, there has not been a single Dalit or Madeshi man student in the program since its inception almost a decade ago.

In relation to education, all of the interviewees have completed the Bachelor’s level and a few hold the Master’s degree. For the last three years, the department has also introduced a Ph. D. program in Gender Studies. Consequently, there are altogether four men students that I choose as my interviewees, along with the remaining interviewees. By occupation, most of them are in paid work. They are working with I/NGOs, government and high schools. Most importantly, they all express that they are for gender equality.

Since I wanted to document the personal experience and view of the students and graduates on men and feminism, the mode of inquiry adopted here is qualitative. In addition, this paper is also informed by the writings of both men and women about men and feminism.

## **Findings and Discussions**

### **Entry to Feminist Consciousness**

Feminists are made, not born (Hooks, 2000). Becoming a feminist is often a gradual process, in some ways a lifelong process (Mishra, 2017). It holds true not only for women but for men as well. Various factors help men develop feminist consciousness. The nature of the household a person is reared in, encounters with non-traditional images and roles of men and women, exposure to social and gender-related issues and to diverse societies are some examples.

Within academics, Women Studies and Gender Studies have globally remained key spaces for men to engage in feminism and gender equality. Since one of the key goals of feminism is to help people develop gender perspective/feminist perspective, which is a perspective that believes that none of the genders should be treated unequally or put into an oppressive situation based on sex or sexual orientation, I here use the terms gender consciousness and feminist consciousness synonymously. It has been

my experience as a teacher that Gender Studies has raised feminist consciousness among students - including male students. The emergence of a new gender consciousness is reflected in the personal accounts of many students I interviewed. For example, Dipak, 29, notes: “Gender Studies has helped me to realize that I am a human being and I should treat and respect all genders (men, women and sexual and gender minorities) equally.” He added that Gender Studies unveiled patriarchy and taught students to analyze all social relations from the gender perspective. He continued:

This program on Gender Studies has been, for me, an opportunity and privilege to become engaged with feminism. I realized that women have to suffer in the patriarchal society in numerous ways. Not only women, but men also have to suffer. That is a great lesson. Thanks to the department for letting me enter the course as a male student.

Similarly, consciousness about gender discrimination at home could lead men to acquire a feminist bent later in life. For example, Ram, 25, noted:

I lived in a joint family. My mother was teaching in school as well as doing household chores. She had to complete the domestic work and earn while my uncles and father did not perform household chores. I saw my mother constantly juggling herself between work and family. That used to hurt me. After joining Gender Studies, I realized it was because of patriarchy that even as earning women have to juggle work and family together, men don’t have to.

Suman, a development worker in his late 30s, linked wide social and gender-related self-exposure as leading men to gender sensitivity and noted:

I grew up in Newar society with a mix of both Hindu and Buddhist cultures. As a first-born male child, I was taught about the responsibilities I ought to take over once I become an adult man. At the age of 10, I left home to become a Buddhist novice. I kept asking myself and others why nuns, who are older than me and had many accolades, would bow to me, a young Buddhist novice with no personal accomplishment. The answer I arrived at was simple. That was because I was a man wearing the chivara (an auspicious robe), which female nuns were not allowed to wear. After a decade into monkhood, I was no different from many other young men and women who never understood how patriarchy had affected men and women - although in different ways. I have been working in the education and social sectors for more than a decade. I have now read texts on gender. Consequently, I have now begun to realize how patriarchy affects men’s lives as well as why feminists struggle for gender justice. For me, the process of becoming a feminist is not only focused on supporting women but also boys, men, trans, queers and others.

Many men shared similar views regarding developing

feminist consciousness and the benefits they enjoyed while engaging with the pedagogy.

### **Benefits From Feminist Engagement**

Bryan (2000) explores what feminism means to men and what men mean to feminism. He notes that many men support efforts to end gender oppression, while others would do so if they were better informed. Some would support equality because they are marginalized themselves, not quite fitting into masculine ideals, and others would do so simply because of fairness.

Most men I spoke with had a positive impression of the Gender Studies program and courses. Their responses for enrolling in the program ranged from a wish to develop a proper gender perspective, becoming able to scrutinize patriarchy at the encompassing social level, becoming a “family man” to reform family relations positively.

Bikram, 30, for example, made a note of his achievement when he said:

By learning this new perspective, I have now become a gender-sensitive person. I value this perspective. I realize that my new identity as a feminist man helped me shed off toxic masculinity that demanded men assume all the burden of household responsibilities. It has helped me to redefine masculinity”.

He adds that the course has not only helped him redefine masculinity for him, it has also motivated him to listen to anti-feminist men’s views in order to understand how patriarchy and masculinity are interlinked.

The account suggests that for the students, patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity were harmful to both men and women. That appears to imply that when men develop a feminist consciousness, they reject to serve as agents of patriarchy. They, instead, seek to redefine masculinity and weaken patriarchy. Some writings in this respect also suggest that men’s engagement in feminism could change the attitude of men about their selves and society as well as their construction of masculinity (Edley & Wetherell, 2001; Meintjies, 1991).

They have not only redefined masculinity. Some of them are trying to interpret the world from an equality perspective. For example, Jagat, in his late-thirties, who works in the development sector, said:

I am proud to be a student of Gender Studies. It has allowed me to comprehend and analyze the patriarchal nature of our society and its impact on human dignity and rights. Though it is difficult, I am changing myself from a stereotypical man to a human being who fights for equality.

Gender Studies has also been a space for many men to enjoy the benefits of becoming theoretically equipped as well. Shakhar, in his late 20s, said:

My understanding of women's rights and feminism was largely dominated by the understanding generated

within the developmental sector. I severely lacked the broader theoretical perspective required in order to analyze gender issues. Gender Studies allowed me to become theoretically informed about various types of feminisms and their respective stances. In consequence, I became able to find out my own standpoint.

Shakhar added that although he was engaged in the Men’s Engagement campaign for women’s rights for quite some time, he was not clear how a man could advocate for women’s rights and men’s and boys’ rights at the same time. This program helped him not deviate from the movement he was currently engaged with. Although men benefit from feminism and Gender Studies in numerous ways, they have to face challenges.

### **Challenges Men Face**

Men students and graduates described diverse and multiple personal and professional challenges while engaging with feminism. The challenges ranged from a deeper realization of men’s privileged position to the circumscribed nature of the male perspective. The realization of ingrained patriarchal values among men and the consequent resistance to gender equality was another challenge. Having to constantly face the charge of being a male sexist – a charge made by those who hold stronger feminist values – was also a socially and politically taxing experience.

**Men’s privileged position:** The realization of the privileged position of men was one of the most pronounced personal and professional challenges many men talked about. Shakhar, for example, shared his views this way:

A person bestowed with immense privileges often finds it hard to revisit his position and ultimately change himself. In addition, a man has never been informed about his relatively powerful position. Similarly, social networks, including the family, do not want a man to shed off a privileged position. In this context, it becomes very difficult for a man to revisit his position. On the other hand, it should not be an excuse for a man to continue to hold on to the privileged position either. It is a tussle that is both painful and enlightening.

Ramesh, 27, added that he knew of many men, including his colleagues and relatives, who advocated for gender equality but simultaneously failed to recognize their personally privileged position. When reminded, they would be into a defensive mode. He further noted that this lack of acknowledgment of personal privilege applied not only to men but to all of those privileged and powerful, including from among the marginalized groups and including women. Bryan (2000), in this context, argues that if men were well informed, they would engage with feminism and participate in feminist movements easily and effectively. Hooks (2000) also blames women feminists



for not working seriously to inform men that they would become freer after shedding a privileged position.

**Lack of male perspective:** Almost all the men I spoke with felt that the courses in the program were not conceptualized well. In particular, the courses had to be made more inclusive by including the social conditions, interests and views of men and sexual and gender minorities. In other words, the course on gender was much too women-centered. More pointedly, it lacked a male perspective and inadequately explored why men behaved and thought the way they did. Some students, in this context, pointed out that Gender Studies was merely a copy or at best an extension of Women's Studies. Teachers and students, they pointed out, were overwhelmingly women. The courses were focused primarily on women's lives and sought to view the world through women's eyes. Binod, 28, puts his view this way: "The male perspective is much less discussed, taught or empathized. As a male student, that concerns me very much." This concern concurs with the arguments put forward by Warren Farrell." Farrell on "Does feminism discriminate against men?" argues that in Gender Studies the male perspective is not dealt with - only the {women}feminist perspective on men ... and calling it Gender Studies (Farrell & Sterba, 2008, pp. 8-9). Farrell's views have forced me to reflect on my own experience as a woman teacher of Gender Studies. While the courses on Gender Studies were focused largely on women, men students wanted new courses, more men teachers and more men students. Similarly, they wanted to learn more about men, men's perspective on the issues taught in the class, men writers' lives and men's contributions toward gender equality in the past and future.

It is not that men did not want to learn about women, women's subordination and empowerment of women. Nonetheless, they were equally interested to learn about their place as men in a patriarchal society. The strains men experienced in conforming to the traditional role of masculinity and mitigating strategies.

**Men's contradictory response to feminism:** It can be anticipated that men's discourses on feminism would likely be varied, fragmented and heterogenous (Edley & Wetherell 2001) because feminism is diverse (Delmar, 1986) and men are diverse by themselves as well. Class, caste, sexuality, religion, and spatial location are some examples. Men marginalized in terms of sexuality, caste, and poverty may perhaps be more pro-feminist because of their striving for social equality. Similarly, some men are publicly gender-progressive, possibly because they value a liberal public life while at the same time remaining socially conservative at home, not the least because they find it difficult to translate liberalism into private life. Pravat, a married man with children, who also has a long experience of working in the government sector, identifies the challenges of feminism at both personal and

professional levels. He said:

At home, my engagement as a feminist man creates confusion among family members including my wife. A confusion takes place, for example, about sharing the household chores. I can clearly sense the confusion among members of my household in a role reversal. I am now changed, but as yet they are not. In office, however, feminist men have different types of problems. Based on my own experience as a longtime government service holder, I could say that advocating women's issues by men in an office setting always creates confusion among men staff in particular. If there are fewer gender sensitive men at office, a feminist man would find it quite difficult to raise gender issues.

**Terminology as a challenge:** There is much terminological challenge, including a preference for certain labels and dislike for some others, in denoting a feminist man. "Equalist," pro-feminist and feminist are some to name. For example, Suman said: "I am a feminist and I believe men feel comfortable labeling themselves as feminists because feminism is for all - men, women and sexual and gender minorities- and not only for women". However, not all men would want to label themselves as feminists. Some did not feel comfortable with the term feminist attached to them.

A few men I interviewed termed themselves "equalist". By "equalist" they implied a person who believes in equal opportunities for all - men, women and sexual and gender minorities, and not only for women. Prabal, 29, noted: "I don't feel comfortable with the term feminist. I am an "equalist". "Equalist" is a much broader term. It also fits well in our context. So many men and sexual and gender minorities are denied the right to become equal. We should speak about them as well. Shakhbar Added:

Though I am comfortable with the tag "feminist man," because it resonates with my life and work, most men are not comfortable with it. Even though they are informed about the essence of feminism, they would rather call themselves "gender activists" but not feminist. Feminism denotes the idea of a woman who is outspoken, strong, anti-men and anti-religious.

In a relatively a gender-equal society, as in the case of Sweden, men prefer to call themselves feminists rather than pro-feminists {or "equalist"} (Holmgren & Hearn 2009). Even those who are engaged in feminism for quite some time share a similar view. Gaurab, 30, however, had a different problem. He said:

I would like to consider myself a feminist. Nonetheless, I am uncomfortable with the term Naribadi (feminist) as such. The term, it appears to me, personifies a woman. I think we have to find a new terminology here. Many men would otherwise remain reluctant to freely

and willingly join feminism. To be honest, it is rather humiliating for us menfolk to attach ourselves to the terminology. We want to engage in feminism because we believe that it can address our problems as well. However, it is not clear how it will enable us to do so.

Gaurab's views, it appears to me, demands wider discussion. In particular, feminism must answer what men today – and different categories of them - gain by becoming feminist. Gender Studies and other feminist academic programs and feminist movements can then be reframed to accommodate willing man feminists into the fold.

**Feminists' mistrust:** In a focus group discussion, Bikram, 24, said: "We are not considered feminists; we are, at best, allies or supporters of feminism. I am a feminist. But how could I make women feminists believe that a man can be a feminist?" Most men reported that women feminists want them to engage in feminist movements, but they do not trust men in the way they trust women. A reaction to this lack of full trust is reflected in Manoj's personal account. Manoj, 30, who works in a development sector noted: "If women feminists don't trust us, there is no point why we should attach ourselves with them. It is not that I don't have anything else to do". Similarly, Ram, 29, working in an INGO, elaborated: "Many feminists even doubt our willingness and ability to work for gender equality. Sometimes it hurts and angers me to the extent that I want to leave the whole business of becoming a feminist." Falkof (2007, p. 8 as cited in Baily, 2012) shares the similar opinion as he says: "Why would anyone want to support a cause that refused to admit them?"

Some students also talked about feminists misdirecting charges on men about women's subordination. Rohit, 23, noted: "When men, in general, are considered sexist in classroom discussion without considering the differences among men in relation to women's oppression, I feel guilty as if I were also part of the problem. But I am not the part of the problem, I am rather trying to be the part of the solution". Meintjies (1991) writes about men's frustration, and anger when they see feminists' misdirected charge on men as sexist. He notes that women feminists mistrust men, even progressive men. He adds that feminists do not allow men to finish their lines if they think men are not following their views. The misdirected charge led some of them to think women feminists only care about women.

During a class room discussion, Shyam, 27, with a background in Engineering, said the following:

I have not come across any feminist writing about men by women feminists in Nepal yet. It may be because I have not explored much. But I feel sure they have not written about men. They care only about women. It seems to me we men have no place in feminism and the feminist movement in Nepal.

Some students added that feminists in Nepal were focused on establishing on their own rights rather than thinking about men's issues. Suman once spoke about

"syndicate feminism". He noted: Feminists who have long been engaged in feminism do not let new ideas and people enter their organizations. They are so rigid in their views about feminism that they keep the possibility for men to engage in feminism highly restricted".

Consequently, even where there are men allies, it is difficult to sustain their interest. Ram, a former student, who now works in an NGO, noted:

My interest in the courses in feminism has decreased with every passing semester. I had great expectations from the courses. I thought the courses will increasingly focus on men. Instead, it has continuously been focused on women's issues. In the beginning, I used to speak out against it. Now I have become silent. There is no point in raising it. No one is interested in listening.

Ram's account fits in with some findings that men would be less committed to gender issues as compared to women following graduation. But one should inquire why men's interest in gender issues decreases in the first place? What are they trying to say? They wished to be part of the program willingly. In any case, the distance that men students keep will make it difficult to find, retain and enlarge men allies in feminism and, thus, ensure gender equality. It would also make it difficult to combat violence against women (Peretz, 2017).

It is indeed the case that many women feminists are reluctant to label men as feminists. They either use the term "feminist allies", or "pro-feminist". Many men and women feminists believe that feminism centers primarily around women and women's rights (Faludi, 2014; Crowe, 2013; Kimmel, 1987; Meer, 2013). Whelehan (1995) explains the political and symbolic importance of women retaining the term 'feminist' for themselves. She notes: "Women should retain the most significant impact of the term feminism – that it has come to signify a female presence, after centuries of invisibility in very real material as well as ideological terms". And there is a concern about a man being a feminist.

**Feminists' concern with men's transfer of power:** Many men who feel threatened by the enhanced power among some women have falsely claimed that men, not women, are in need of social protection (Farell & Sterba, 2008). Such claims are audible in Nepal as well. We hear many men say women are increasingly overprotected by the state. One middle-aged high caste man who was a university teacher, for example, noted once in a gender workshop that Nepal had bent much too backward to unduly support women. He was also worried about how long such support may continue and if such support may expand in the future. He further was of the view that men were left out from the government's protection programs. Falaudi (2014), in this context, writes about men's anxieties that their historically privileged position is becoming sharply misaligned. Men's sense of power and the fear of losing it along the passage of women's advancement have made men more vulnerable

in recent years. Falaudi (2014) writes women's liberation, in one way is about men being free of patriarchal shackle. But it is men who are fearful of being free. Sita, 35, one of my woman students during a discussion on men's engagement in feminism, noted, "Our men want to be seen as progressive but, in reality, they don't want to transfer power".

One of the key traits of a feminist is the person should recognize one's privileged position. If men fail to recognize that sexism provides them with certain privileges, and if they lack the willingness to shed the privileged position, they cannot become feminists. About men shedding the power, Hooks (2000) notes that we always ask, motivate and request men to leave the privileged position. We even blame them for not putting the hats off of them. But we fail to provide them with feminist vision. Its feminists' duty to frame a feminist man, make men feel comfortable with the image and help them adhere to the image.

**Untenable position among women feminists:** Feminism had historically been about women, for women and mostly by women. Women were at the very center of feminist analysis. Feminism could not have crystallized without it. Feminist thinking, in the course of time, also expanded to address the changing nature of society (Dietz, 2003). During the 1980s and 1990s, things started changing. There was a realization that men were themselves victims of patriarchy. This led to a fundamental shift from the conceptualization of patriarchy: That patriarchy was the cause of women's subordination and oppression and that of man. The shift of the core of interest from women and to gender was an outcome of this shift. Some feminists still do not feel comfortable with this shift. Some in this section completely reject men's involvement (Beauvoir, 1953) because they perceive men's involvement as a threat to feminism. Under this view, men's engagement in feminism is a threat to an ideology, i.e., feminism, that uniquely empowers women in a patriarchal society (Schmitz & Haltom, 2017, p. 279 as cited in Kimmel, 1998). For others, men's involvement is fundamentally necessary and, as such, feminism should be an umbrella for all, and not only women (Hooks, 2000; Baily, 2012). Hooks (2000) identifies patriarchy as the root cause of gender inequality and women's subordination. She has argued that both men and women are victims of patriarchy. Feminism, therefore, ought to be for both men and women. Meer (2013), however, argues that although men's involvement remains crucial, it is women who should be in the center of feminism to achieve gender equality. But many feminists are also stuck to the notion of female powerlessness, something that the post-feminist Naomi Wolf (1990) terms, "victim feminism," to the extent that they do not wish to listen to men's experience of powerlessness, their vulnerability and their sense of loneliness (Farell & Sterba 2008; Meintjies, 1991). Some do not even believe men could become feminist (Beauvoir, 1953).

Many men increasingly have come to hold the perspective that women are victims of patriarchal structures and ideology and, as such, wish to support women by engaging with feminism (Kimmel, 1987; Khumalo, 2005). Khumalo (2005), for example, asks: "Is it indeed possible for us to live calmly and happily when we know that more than half of our citizens - women and children - are violated physically, emotionally, economically and psychologically?" (p. 88).

**Men's expectation from feminism:** Many men were clearly indicating that men also have problems in patriarchal society and feminism should address men's problems as well. In an interview, Nayan, 37, a graduate of Gender Studies, noted:

As a man, I am supposed to handle all the difficult situations at home and outside. But this is a responsibility that is problematic. Being a biological man does not mean that I have the capacity or willingness solve all or most problems. I can understand this is the cost I have to pay for being a man in a patriarchal society. However, most Nepali feminists, who possess highly limited knowledge on feminism, blame men for women's subordination and oppression. They don't analyze the patriarchal system that forces men to assume the dominating role. They conclude that men are enemies. They point to men while discussing women's sufferings. I feel angry. I think most men do the same. To be more specific, feminists must change themselves and try to understand men's problems as well.

I remember the account of one student while I was discussing International conventions geared to ensure women's rights. Binod, 21, said: "But no one talks about "us" men. Everyone including feminists are busy paving the way for women to move ahead as if we men didn't have any problem whatsoever." This view is shared by many men students. For example, Shyam, 38, has a feeling that most feminist movements in Nepal are pushed forward for the sake of the promotion of the popularity of the movement leaders. Only a few feminists, they think, are serious about engaging men in feminism. If most were serious, they would have sought ways to ensure an active engagement of men in feminists and women's movements. They were not, however, doing so.

**Generational issue:** Rebecca Walker (1995) noted that given the diverse interests, concerns and realities of younger and older women, women need to attach themselves to different types of feminism. Walker's concern is shared by my interviewees as well. Ashok, 23, for example, noted:

The major challenge of feminism and feminist movement in Nepal is that it has failed to make the younger generation clear about what feminism and feminist movement are. The understanding of many of the young men and women about feminism is one of

radical feminism. They learn about feminism mostly by the media. And media is negative about feminism. Because of this, they remain either very confused or hold a negative impression of feminism and the feminist movement in Nepal. Before joining this program, I myself was very confused even though I earned my Bachelor degree from a good college

### Way Forward

There were several strategies the interviewees suggested for an effective engagement of men with feminism in Nepal. This included, most importantly, the insertion of a male perspective in the curriculum of Gender Studies. It also included the formation of men's and boys' groups and an enhanced clarity among women feminists on men's involvement. In addition, there were several strategies men suggested with a view to motivate, retain and increase men's participation in feminism.

### Consciousness Raising for Men

Consciousness-raising has been a key strategy in feminism. Conscious raising for men allows them to concretize "patriarchy as a system of dominance, how it became institutionalized and how it is perpetuated and maintained" (Hooks, 2000, p. 7). It also helps men realize that patriarchy not only dominates and oppresses women but also dehumanizes men. In an interview about men and patriarchy, South Asian feminist Kamla Bhasin notes: "We talk about what our women have to go through because of the society, but it is equally sad what our men have to go through because of the way society wants to perceive them. Unless men change, their humanity would be destroyed... Our men don't need to change to support women, but to save themselves from being brutalized by centuries of exposure to patriarchy" (Pishroty, 2013). Consciousness-raising program, thus, helps a man become a feminist and a better human being.

**Inclusion of male perspective:** Amidst a growing concern of men that Gender Studies does not include them fully – not the least because it has become an extension of Women's Studies, a program on Gender studies must include men's perspective. Men's interest in Gender Studies cannot adequately sustain men students' interest without it. Gender Studies must become relational rather than one based on identity. That is, gender Studies must describe and explain the nature of relations among men, women and people with many other gender identities. As such Gender Studies cannot legitimately focus on women as such. Only when Gender Studies investigates the nature of relations between men and women – and other gender groups, men will own the program. Such a redesign is also more likely to curb gender-based violence and ensure gender equality.

**Wider debate on men and feminism:** Most people rely on mass media, social media and politics to be informed about feminism. Many, in part because of the preceding, construe feminists as extremists who do not marry, do not become mothers, and hate men (Mishra, 2005). The image created is one of commandeering women. This phobia prevails across regions and generations. Scharff (2019) notes that though there much progress in matters of gender in recent years and even as many women in the United States America (USA) and the United Kingdom (UK) are identifying themselves as feminists, young women remain reluctant to label themselves as feminists. Scharff then concludes that this is large because of a fear of becoming labeled as men haters or somebody that is un-feminine. A much wider debate on feminism is, therefore, essential. It is equally essential to debate the relations between men and feminism and to expand research initiatives on this front (Peretz, 2017).

Investing in gender responsive educational institutions: The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) notes that educational institutions can play a significant role in achieving gender equality by promoting new patterns of beliefs and attitudes and by avoiding the reproduction or reinforcement of social inequalities (UNESCO, 2013). The personal accounts of men I interviewed also reveal that Gender Studies has helped them become gender-responsive persons. Some of them suggested that the course should be introduced from the school level to produce more men with a gender perspective. Very recently, the new scholarship on women and gender has trickled down to pre-college levels as well. Gender Studies was introduced in 2009 as an optional subject in the national curriculum in the high school system for Grade 12. More recently, a course on Gender Studies is being offered for both Grades 11 and 12. This gender-related outcome could also be put forward to argue that educational institutions should be resourced both by the government and other socially progressive agencies. It must be noted that funding remains a major issue for studies on women and gender globally and in Nepal. Mishra (2017), for example, reveals that funding was a major issue when the first Women's Studies Post-Graduate Program was introduced in 1996 at Tribhuvan University and in Nepal.

**Investing in boys and young men:** Investing in boys and men for promoting a new understanding of gender and realigning gender relations is crucial. It can initially be carried out in schools and other public and private institutions in a dialogical manner. Such dialogues provide men, in particular, with the opportunity to discuss their lives as men in a patriarchal society and to realize their privileged positions while at the same time ruminating on the real and high costs they suffer while accessing such privileges.

Even though some feminists remain critical of public



investments in men and boys (see Mier, 2013), informing and educating men about patriarchy is a necessary condition to end violence against women and ensure gender equality. Khumalo (2005), in this regard, argues that it is high time gender activists should target men to ensure gender equality and end violence against women.

**Strength of men-led organizations:** Men-led feminist organizations could play a significant role in scrutinizing patriarchy and lowering violence against women. Women feminists, in particular, should be well informed and accept men's role in feminism. For example, the White Ribbon campaign against men's violence against women, that was led by men and began in 2011 was a significant departure. So was the UN led He-for-She program.

In Nepal itself, there are a few men-led organizations that are motivating men to become feminists. The organizations educate men that feminism supports all genders and gender identities. In addition, the organizations participate in feminist movements to express solidarity for the feminist cause. There is a role for more organizations of such a nature.

**Clarity among women feminists:** Feminists must come up with a clearer position regarding men's engagement in feminism. As it is, there is a wide division among women feminists in this regard. Some feminists are reluctant to consider men as feminists as such, e.g. Beauvoir (1953). Those who seek pro-feminist men's help in struggling for gender justice do not nonetheless refrain from fully including men in the movement. For example, "since assault against women is historically seen as a 'women's issue,' feminist organizers often consider men to be ill-equipped to understand, let alone challenge women's oppression (Schmitz & Haltom, 2017). Bryan (2000), on the other hand, sees the value of informed women feminists, who know that men could be oppressed and that men could be valuable allies in the struggle to end gender oppression. Although most feminists - both men and women - accept men as pro-feminist and feminist allies, that is not a sufficient condition for men to be attracted and remain welcome in a feminist movement. This holds particularly true for younger men. Without a structure and temperament that welcomes younger men, it will prove difficult to keep them engaged. One of my interviewees once said: "Young men, in particular, are seeking a greater role in the feminist movement. They want to be considered feminist. If feminism fails in this respect, men would be reluctant to take ownership of feminist movements and agendas".

**Gender progressive spaces:** Spaces must be created for wide scale discussions among men on masculinity, sexism, gender-based violence, homophobia, etc., in order to comprehend and analyze patriarchy. Acknowledging and confronting male privilege is one key step to becoming a feminist man. Although individual men differ in what

and how much power they hold, male as a group is more powerful than women as a group. Meintjies (1991, p. 12) notes that he used to be anxious due to an inability to fulfill the expectation of society to conform to traditional masculine roles and images. When such expectations are being discussed among gender progressive people or institutions, the pros and cons of the male expectations become evident. If men discuss the issues with other men, it is likely to be more fruitful in that they understand that very few people fulfill such expectations. Politically progressive men who work for the benefit of the community could be considered prime candidates for "gender work". A gender just and equal society can become possible if such men could be brought in to work in partnership with women (Khumalo, 2005).

There is an urgent need to identify various platforms through which a male child is socialized, comprehend its gendered nature and the consequent production of hegemonic masculine manhood. Barber and Kretschmer (2013) argue that men-only spaces like fraternities and clubs should be re-conceptualized. Men, if socialized only with men, would be likely to turn hostile to women, thus re-defining and "heightening" masculinity. May and Strikwerda (1994, p. 134) argue that male bonding and socialization in men-only groups contribute to the prevalence of rape in Western societies. Therefore, gender-progressive men and their organizations should prioritize targeting such spaces for consciousness-raising among boys and young men. Among such men and boys, for example, could be inmates of boys' hostel, organization of local bus drivers, members of men's clubs, etc.

**Need and importance of an intersectional perspective:** An intersectional perspective is an essential component of feminism. Male privilege is a key challenge in feminism. Confronting male privileges also requires intersectional analysis, i.e. those based on belongings based on multiple classes, ethnicity, religion, location, sexuality and sexual identity. In addition, how men interface with feminism depends on men's intersectional identities such as class, caste, ethnicity, sexuality, etc. If the feminist project values differences between men, more men could be engaged in the project. Otherwise, it becomes the project of privileged men (Peretz, 2017). One of my students' accounts reflects intersectionality's perspective in feminism. Jivan, a janajati man in his late 30s, notes: "Feminism should address not only the problem of "high caste" men from the Hills. In fact, they are relatively in a better position than other men in our society. Discrimination is deeply rooted in the lives of poor Madheshi, Dalit, Muslim and sexual and gender minorities". It should be noted that Peretz (2017) also identifies most of the feminist writings on men's experience are based on the pathways adopted by heterosexual, white, urban, rich and young men within the feminist movement. People in Nepal are diverse in terms of culture, class, geographical locations and sexuality, etc. If feminism fails to address the intersectional belonging among men, men

will be less likely to engage with feminism.

### Conclusion

Gender equality is a key principle of human life in the modern era. The Nepali state has acknowledged this as a cardinal matter of principle at least since 1990. It has brought some of the principles into practice as well. The 1991 constitution, for the first time, legally ensured gender equality by clearly stating that no one should be discriminated on the basis of sex.

The engagement of men in feminism has been one of the key strategies globally and in Nepal for quite some time. The objective of such engagement, of course, is to ensure gender equality and to combating gender-based violence. Documenting men's experience with and interpretation of feminism can be a key strategy both to bring men face-to-face with the costs of patriarchy as also for feminism to learn how to strategize to sustainably transform men into equal partners at this task.

In addition, the engagement of men in feminism could enable them to scrutinize the ill effects of patriarchy for men at the personal, social and professional levels. Such scrutiny, in turn, could make men better husbands, fathers, etc., and better person and citizens in the civil and political society.

Notwithstanding the benefits, there are several challenges a feminist man is forced to face. There are several challenges men have to face while engaging with feminism. Questioning the privileged male position is by no means easy. Similarly, the fact that feminist women often remain suspicious of feminist men's loyalty to feminism is not easy to deal with either.

Along with the challenges, there were several strategies the men students suggested in order to motivate, retain and increase men's participation in feminism in Nepal. Organizing gender consciousness-raising programs for men was one. Increasing the resources available to gender-sensitive educational institutions was another. Resourcing boys and young men to build networks was still another. Most importantly, perhaps, the suggestion to implement educational programs that convey the large-scale personal and social costs of patriarchy to boys and men was of immense significance.

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