

Women Empowerment Through Participation in Open Defecation-Free Initiatives: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Women empowerment still remains straggling in the context of Nepal. Only 38% of women are able to make decisions in different works (MOHP et al., 2017). This study aims to explore women's experiences and their self-empowerment through their participation in Open Defecation-free (ODF) campaigns. The central question of this study is what lived experiences of the women who were involved in ODF campaigns are and what this means to their self-empowerment. I used a phenomenological research design and the phenomenon of this study is 'open defecation-free movement'. The three key dimensions of the theory of empowerment, viz. agency, resources, and achievement underpin this study. The interviews were conducting with three informants based on theoretical sampling added for enriching the information. The interviews were transcribed into Nepali, codes generated categorized, compared, grouped, and thematized. Three major themes were drawn from the data-women's journeys to self-empowerment, transformation of societal and behavioral dynamics, and obstacles to sustainable women empowerment. The link between women empowerment and societal change is complex and interconnected with each other. Still, our society is ruled by male domination and patriarchal thinking and structure. Therefore, women's self-empowerment and the ability to take challenges through the involvement in other development agendas are going to gain power and shift from masculinity to a transformative society in the future. Nonetheless, women themselves have to take challenges and be empowered with the support of men.

Keywords: experience, free campaign, obstacle, open defecation, self-empowerment, transformation

Introduction

Having six years of professional journey in the Water Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) sector and over a decade in the health sector of the country, I found that

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donor agencies and the government are investing many resources to improve the lives of unreached people, including girls and women, and their empowerment in society along with the social development process.

I see and face many challenges in WASH as well as the health sector among women and girls who are only mobilized for campaigns, education, and community mobilization in the community. However, women's struggle to empower and make meaningful participation, lead decisions and see themselves in leadership positions remains a challenge as they are only given the role of campaigners. Their work is not recognized by family and society but there are gaps in research and documentation in the context of Nepal. The country has made progress in achieving the Open Defecation-free (ODF) campaigns (DWSS, 2019) already and women's contribution is immense in the community. Exploration into the contribution of women, women empowerment and its outcomes in women's self-empowerment process, particularly in the rural community, remains impoverished. Therefore, I have pledged to undertake this study in this area.

Water Sanitation and Hygiene comes under the basic human right in the Constitution of Nepal (GON, 2015). The WASH situation in Nepal is far from adequate. According to the latest data from the Nepal Government regarding Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation (DWSS, 2015), sanitation coverage has reached 93% and the country has already been declared as open defecation-free (DWSS, 2019). National ODF declaration was made 4 years before but locally it was initiated 15 years before. Many women such as Female Community Health Volunteers (FCHVs) and others are involved as front-line workers and volunteers in the ODF campaign process. However, those women's experiences have not been explored as a key research issue in the WASH sector yet.

Women and girls are involved in many events and committees and development processes as tokenism as this is happening at the current local government level such as the Water Sanitation and Hygiene Coordination Committee (WASHCC) at the municipality and ward levels (Plan International Nepal, 2018). With this evidence and my daily work reflection, I all the time reflect on why women are just used for campaigning but not given the role after that. Women and girls work as campaigners in the WASH sector but their empowerment and involvement in decision-making and leadership roles at the household level are always questioned. It is important to understand why this is happening, how women's empowerment can be geared up and their contribution asserted by exploring the experiences of the women who are engaged in the ODF campaigns as community change agents. Additionally, it is also equally necessary to explore women's personal experiences, health, and safety, dignity, and privacy, socio-cultural factors, participation, family and community support in their lives. I explored the previous literature where I found women's experiences from different communities, what happened in different communities, what key factors played the role, how sanitation status increased, and how the movements took place, but every document has reported women's involvement differently.

However, I could not find more studies conducted to explore the lived experiences of the women who have been directly involved in the campaigning process to bring about community-level changes and still contribute to the same sector in society. The study carried out in India shows that women were fully involved in the ODF campaign and, once ODF was achieved, they were not involved in further development activities (Pardeshi, 2009). This shows that women gained pushbacks in household chores and were not given the opportunity for empowerment. Another study shows that women's empowerment and participation in community-managed water and sanitation remains a challenge due to the lack of knowledge of women's empowerment as it relates to their participation and leadership in community-managed water and sanitation activities (Hamlet et al., 2022). In contrast with the study's focus on knowledge and empowerment, another study reported that the motivation behind open defecation, particularly among women, is important to combat the ODF sustainability issue. It is crucial to understand individual preferences, perspectives, religious convictions, family or cultural traditions, societal customs, and resource availability (Bhatt, 2019). So, there are multiple factors and dimensions of constraints in different contexts and different experiences.

For this particular concern of women's self-empowerment in relation to similar campaigns, individual experiences of previous studies are not able to sufficiently explore women's sustainable self-empowerment and transformation. Therefore, I wanted to undertake this exploration with the women who are fully involved in the campaigning process. With a similar context in Nepal and multiple realities of the context, this study aims to explore the women's experiences and their self-empowerment through the ODF campaigns with the central question "What are the lived experiences of the women who were involved in the ODF campaigns?"

The next section of this article covers the theorization of the study, methodology, results, discussion, and conclusion.

Theoretical Assimilation with the Study

Empowerment theory has been described by many scholars of education. Here, I have considered Cornelia Flora's empowerment theory as the main theoretical lens and followed her by highlighting the three components of the theory, viz. women's role as resources, agency, and achievement. If women are empowered, they become community assets (Aigner et al., 2001; Kabeer, 1999). Both the pieces of literature follow Flora's principles in a well-defined way. Reviewing the results of these studies of women's experiences in ODF campaigns, I have adopted these three dimensions fully aligned with Flora's idea and followed the feminist and empowerment theory in this study (Turner & Maschi, 2015) by linking women's agency, resources, and their achievements. The three key dimensions are an important aspect to be excavated from the personal experiences of women (Kabeer, 1999). Feminist and empowerment theory is more applicable in social and practical settings where the women are involved in ODF and community settings. This study explores the results in the similar dimensions of women's agency, women as

resources for the respective community, and their individual achievements and community achievements in declaring a community as ODF. These are the important factors to align with the results and discussion in the chapter below.

Methodology

This is a phenomenological research study performed in August 2023 in Gadhi Rural Municipality of Sunsrai, Nepal. The research paradigm followed subjectivist epistemology and relativist ontology. It was somehow value-laden as the researcher herself was working in similar sectors over half a decade in the same community. Furthermore, its philosophical paradigm was constructed within the individual experience (Taylor & Medina, 2011).

Data Collection Tools

The qualitative data were collected through the use of in-depth interviews (IDIs). The initially drafted tools based on the research objectives were reviewed by the mentor, discussed and finalized accordingly.

Sample and Sampling Techniques

The participants were selected based on a purposive sampling method (Koul, 1984). The researcher used this technique carefully based on the study purpose assuming that each participant had exclusive and rich information about their engagement in the ODF campaigning process as community mobilisers. The members of the accessible population were not interchangeable. The sample size was determined by understanding the specific community context and women's experiences for individual experiences to share as knowledge product, but not to generalize it. Initially, the researcher considered three participants from one municipality for the IDIs. All the participants represented the dominant population segmentation and their castes were Singh, Shah, and Rishidev. The face-to-face interviews were conducted with the participants using the interview guidelines. However, the interviews were successful only with the two respondents, and the interview with the woman from the Rishidev family was not successful due to her language barrier and local level environment. In addition to these two sample participants, one more participant was selected based on theoretical sampling, that is, to reach the saturation of the information.

Ethical Considerations

The researcher obtained oral consent from each participant in advance from the phone conversation and written consents were taken before the interviews. The written consents contained a description of the study purpose, the participant's role in the research, procedures to be followed, benefits, risks, and confidentiality, expected duration of participation, right to refuse, and the approximate number of study participants.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data were collected using the IDIs guidelines. Before that, the participants were informed about the study objectives and their verbal consents were obtained over the phone, and the time and schedule of interviews as well. After that, the researcher visited the research site and obtained the written consents of the participants before the interviews were conducted. No any compensation was given for participating in the research process as the interviews were conducted in the home setting.

Both of the in-depth interviews were recorded on a mobile recording system and transcribed manually and typed in the Nepali language. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was adopted to the data analysis process (Eatough & Smith, 2017). The data were coded, categorized and thematized, and the themes were compiled to develop global themes. Finally, the researcher reported the results. The participants were anonymized assigning the pseudonyms A and B in the text.

Findings

Experiences of women in Open Defecation-free campaigns are analyzed based on the objectives of the study from the collected information and the following themes were generated.

Women's Journey to Self-Empowerment

Although women were mobilized as champions in ODF campaigns, their voices were not fully heard in the community. The participation of women in the different committees was seen low and only with the support of the men, but women have the experience of socialization as a facilitator, pleasure of work, joyful movements, positive impact on their health, and women empowerment. There are various experiences of women who worked as volunteers in the ODF movement as well as change agents of the respective society. The key reflection of individual experiences shows that there were joyful moments, positive impact on health, the environment of the work, construction of toilets in a community, and virtually the cleanliness of the community. Men were supporting women in their self-empowerment, community acceptance and hearing, good experiences of socialization, and their attempts to be good facilitators in the community. Considering the different experiences the women had, Respondent A expressed that:

The water sanitation and Hygiene sector is good and needs to be worked on intensively with more effort, rigorous contribution, and more time and, only then, the community understands the importance of the campaign and change. This makes me very happy and I have observed visible social change which makes me very happy and feel proud of it.

On the other hand, Respondent B said, "I focus on self-change in terms of knowledge, social cohesion, knowing each other, development of leadership,

confidence in public speaking, and other many changes". Women's experiences illustrate that working as volunteers in the ODF campaign helps them change them individually and socially, and the changes are interrelated and occur simultaneously in their social life.

Self-empowerment for empowerment improvement of women was seen visibly in the community during and after the ODF campaigns. The community was listening to the women, respecting and accepting their advice. Their social reputation was high which led them to transform themselves at the individual level, taking accountability for the self-empowerment aspect of the women's experiences. Considering this reflection, Respondent A shared her experiences as:

With my past social work experiences and self-confidence, I am still working in the WASH sector for promoting my community. The local government invited me to most of the WASH related meetings and work at the municipality and the ward, and listened to my advice, which is a great opportunity for me to be self-empowered and contribute to society.

Nevertheless, Respondent B had an opposing version, "Women have to take challenges themselves for self-empowerment. No one gives any respect and opportunity to women without taking risks and challenges, and doing hard work in our society". Self-empowerment of women is evident in the ODF campaigns, and their long impact on women's personal and social lives as well.

Transformation of Societal and Behavioral Dynamics

Social and behavioral change aspects are the key changes that happen in society during the ODF movement. They bring about social, cultural, and behavioral changes and contribute to institutional mechanism also, especially, with awareness programs, subsidies to toilet construction in marginalized groups, developed peer pressure on higher caste and rich people to have toilets as social prestige. Respondent A remarked that "once the marginalized family construct the toilet with subsidies, higher social status families have a challenge of prestige for constructing toilets". One of the lines from my observation notes spells out that "every poor and marginalized family of Respondent B's community has a clean and functional toilet". Social awareness and triggering campaigns of ODF under the monitoring of community people mandatorily promote the construction of toilets at the household level.

Toilets become social prestige in the society of higher status families. The evidence shows, as reported by Participant A, that "the rich families that did not have toilets had a peer pressure from the marginalized households constructing the toilets. This was related with their economic and social prestige in the community". However, Respondent B's idea is different than that of Respondent A as she opines that more focus on importance of toilets in the households is one of the social conveyors to communicate in society which triggers as a change agent. She mentioned that "Ghar bhanda pani jaruri chha charpi, ghar ta jhupadi bhay pani hunchha". Bringing about social change through social awareness is quite

challenging due to many existing factors. To support this, respondent B further said that:

She was the one making the toilet pan and slab in her own house and giving the community the accessibility to the toilet construction materials during the campaign. However, the cost of the items of construction materials was recovered slowly on installment basis from the community.

This is a great role as a campaigner and the community respects her due to her support and dedication to the contribution. Individual and community behavior change is important in ODF and social awareness programs play important roles to change the behavior of the community.

Obstacles to Sustainable Women Empowerment

Empowering women is not everything; it is an imperative process for the holistic development of women and progress of society, as it unlocks their full potential and enhances their quality of life. Cultural hesitancy, cultural stereotype, exploitation of women's role, male domination, male sovereignty and supremacy are the challenging factors for women to gain viable empowerment in Nepali society. Culturally, men do not accept women's leadership role which is the main hindrance to women for sustainable empowerment. They think that women are the resources in the households and society. Respondent A said that "a very few women are involved in water sanitation and hygiene committees and still not getting the leadership role, and they are not accepted by men". Respondent B focuses more on "women's multiple roles – when women become social workers, they must have to take care of household chores as well as their children". Therefore, women are really facing challenges though they want to get more exposure, empowerment and social contribution, recognition and leadership roles in society.

The key program interventions and approaches consider achieving the expected results of the ODF movements. They have different kinds of impression on the two respondents. Respondent A said, "Social awareness and technical as well as financial support need to be taken care of from the program prospect", whereas respondent B expressed, "Continuity of a follow-up action plan, selfless support to community to raise awareness and sustainable behavior change are important". Nonetheless, my understanding is that the women who are involved in campaigning need to link themselves with other development programs and make their self-development continuously for sustainable programs as well as their personal sustainability and support from the male counterpart.

Discussion

In the preceding section, I have presented under different themes the experiences of the woman participants involved in ODF campaigns. Women's experience and self-empowerment are interrelated and happen simultaneously throughout the process of ODF campaigning as the woman participants' experiences reflected. The similar fact, as reported in Uprety (2024), is that girls

were empowered, their confidence fostered, and individuals as well as society changed with the support of enabling environment from colleagues, teachers, and family members. When women were involved in campaigns and community mobilization programs, they were self-empowered and able to speak and convince community members. Similarly, the study undertaken in Maharashtra, India, shows that women are likely to play crucial and diverse roles making significant contributions towards understanding the objective of creating open defecation-free villages. Women themselves were not only benefited substantially from the campaign but also that they actively participated in its implementation (Pardeshi, 2009). This is the good evidence that the same is true in the similar context of Nepal. This can be linked with developing self-agency as per the empowerment theory as reflected in the theorization above. Self-empowerment of women can be visibly seen in the experiences of women and its long impact on women's personal and social life from the contribution of ODF campaigns is also evident. Women empowerment is possible through the ODF campaign where women agency building is linked with the past and current achievement felt by women themselves.

Transformation of societal and behavioral dynamics is another area where women put their more effort and time from the beginning of the social movement. Women were working in the community without their time zone from the early morning to any time in the evening for making the community understand the importance of ODF campaigns, triggering approach, motivation and information dissemination in the community. Likewise, Pardeshi (2009) shows that women were recognized as focal points in information, education and counselling to community, playing multi-layered roles as motivators, initiators, and implementers during the campaigning process in India. My understanding, in line with the expressions of the participants in this study as well, is that crafting social change for ODF campaigns is quite difficult but important to make the community understand the value of the toilet, hygiene and its impact on the health and development of people, and society at large. Without this effort, sustainable change is challenging. There are still some households with no toilets even after ODF campaigning, which has multiple reasons such as lack of land, flood and disaster, fragmentation of the joint family into nuclear ones, etc. To link with the dimension of empowerment theory, women are the main resources in ODF campaigns.

Sustainable women empowerment is quite challenging but important as the woman participants in this study experienced. After the completion of ODF campaigns, women really faced challenges though they wanted to get more exposure, empowerment and social contribution, recognition and leadership roles in society. There are always obstacles for them. Without the involvement of women and their contribution, there are always challenges in the sustainability of the program achievements. There is a similar experience of the women in an Indian community. Even after achieving the objectives of ODF campaigns in villages and communities, women's involvement in other development activities was very limited, as men were taking the positions and leadership at all levels. They stopped inviting the women to the meetings of different committees and again the women

were back to the responsibilities of household chores (Pardeshi, 2009). This dimension is linked with the achievements of the target. In contrast to this opinion, company and responsive care from other women and men in the community help women for their sustainable empowerment through their motivation, social status, and the new knowledge from different trainings if they get opportunities as compared to men (Anderson et al., 2022).

Conclusion

Experiences of women's involvement in ODF campaigns are diverse outcomes, i.e. women's experience and self-empowerment, transformation of societal and behavioral dynamics, and obstacles to sustainable women empowerment are the key themes emerged in the data. There are always obstacles to women having sustainable self-empowerment. Without women's involvement and their contribution, there are always challenges in sustainable change in society. So, there is a reciprocal relationship. The key interfering factors for sustainable women empowerment and their autonomy have been found to be patriarchy, male domination and holding of power by men, low income and feeble property right as well as decision-making right, and the burden at the household level. Males are afraid to accept women's leadership and to transfer their power to women from the socio-cultural perspective, and women are limited to the responsibility of the household level work burden.

Women's self-empowerment and social change are interrelated with each other. In the current setting, males have taken the leadership and authority of the community and the family. Culturally, women's potentiality is exposed to change their sustainable empowerment. Nevertheless, women are still scorched in multiple burdens and not able to go out from the house to generate income. Even today, our community is ruled by male domination and patriarchal thinking and structure. Therefore, women's self-empowerment and the ability to take challenges by being involved in other development agenda are going to gain power and shift from masculinity to a transformative society in future. Finally, women themselves have to take challenges and be empowered with the support of men. This study covers only very limited areas: how women can empower themselves through a sanitation campaign during the open defecation-free movement in a small sample community of the country. Therefore, a similar study on women empowerment through the programs like WASH campaigns is one of the key areas for further study, including larger samples and multiple locations, which can reveal more evidence in empowerment through WASH among women.

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