

## Multifarious Subalternity of Underprivileged Women in Nepal

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### Abstract

*This paper explores the potentials of Nepalese women by unearthing obstacles and challenges they are facing because of prevailing inequality and discrimination in almost all sectors across Nepal. The article undertakes gender diversity and its problems and then analyzes them. Eventually it extends some suggestions on empowering females so that they can lead prestigious lives. Since Nepal is patterned in the blueprint of male supremacy, women's condition is pathetic and bizarre. Pathetic narratives about gender inequality and discrimination pervade both urban and rural Nepal. Besides, religious social systems especially the Hindu social system that predominantly believes in vertical hierarchy in terms of caste, gender, and class, engrosses the women's rights by discarding their genuine demands. Nevertheless, subaltern theorists see hopes for the amendment in their conditions provided women are empowered economically, culturally and politically. Economic and political strengths of women can leverage their positions in society at large. To counter the males, the females must be made capacitated.*

**Key Words:** Economy, Culture, Diversity, Inequality, Hierarchy, Oppression,

### Introduction

This article interrogates the customary trend of placing women on the margin and valuing men greatly with the special focus everywhere in Nepalese society. Although differing male and female in respect of social constructs via men and women and marginalization of the latter in different domains just under the rubric of patriarchal notions is beyond social justice, this practice continues in across the country. The article employs subaltern theory as an intellectual lens to scrutinize the plight of females in the country. Subaltern theory interrogates discriminatory norms and values pervasive in almost all sectors of society. There are different social categories wherein discrimination based on gender diversity can be seen such as class, gender, religion, regionalism, caste, and ethnicity and so on. This article investigates into problems faced by women especially in Nepal, a South Asian country located at the lap of Mt. Everest, the peak of the world. How society defines women and treats them is the major query in the paper. Nepal is structured with the favor to men rather than women. Therefore, the subjugation of women has become a common practice across the country. Inequality is the byproduct of discriminatory system that guides society. Indeed, gender inequality implies to disparities existent between women and men. Men enjoy more freedom and opportunities than women do because system is patriarchal. Gender inequality is a main obstruction for human development worldwide because gender

difference in Nepal is the foundation of prejudice in different spheres including health, education, politics, and workplaces. Although the country is moving toward development in terms of economy, social justice, and human values, the customary practices still prevail over the modern laws and policies.

### **Discussion**

The larger part of Nepal is rural and therein women usually stay unpaid because they are involved in household chores and farming rather than outside workplaces. Despite their boundless labor in the household activities, they are not respected and their work is not valued. I mean their contribution is not recognized, which directly affects their social status. As the country is growing modernized, such women lag behind in practicing the principles of democracy including freedom, economic prosperity, self-decisive power and so on. Their voices are unheard and their aspirations are discarded in male-dominated society.

The status of women in rural Nepal is pathetic because both men and women prefer sons rather than daughters. Their preference leads to discriminating between male and female children right from the beginning of their birth. Male children are appreciated and valued more, whereas people generally consider female children as the secondary responsibility. Therefore, they hardly value females. The germination of seeds for putting men and women at different scales divides society in terms of environments and training. Female children are trained differently from the male children in the same society and family environment. The society is religiously dominated especially by Hindu social system that prioritizes men. The religious ceremonies and funerals are imperatively oriented toward the presence of men rather than women that makes son compulsory and valued. Women cannot enjoy freedom even in the household activities as most of the economic decisions are taken by male members.

Women in Nepal largely belong to Hinduism as they practice norms and values accorded in the scriptures of Hinduism. The scriptures accord women as the part of men. Therefore, they are obliged to abide by the patriarchal norms. Nepal is an Indian subcontinent country that comprises more than 80% Hindus. Cultural, social, economic, political marginalization and deprivation of females are the byproducts of male hegemony.

As subalternity is a popular social issue in South Asia, Nepalese women cannot discard the norms and values accorded in the societal laws. There are so many problems associated with Nepalese women including discrimination and oppression in education, health, and politics. The way women are victimized and oppressed in society is the issue of discussion under the theoretical framework of subalternity in Nepal. Janaki Nair (1994) cites Linda Gordon who asserts that it is not to see the history of female experience as powerless. Instead women should become powerful to redraw their genuine history. They should rebel against customarily discriminatory practices inherent in different social institutions. "Developing a: complex and dynamic conception of female agency which does not pose these paradigms as contradictory or exclusive is essential for feminist historical knowledge, especially as it confronts the figure of woman as 'always already victim'" (Nair, 1994). The feminist

historical knowledge declines the data that prevail and overshadow the image of women by pushing them as victims. GayatriChakravortySpivak's (1988) viewpoint, when the advantaged theorist assumes her own 'transparency', the structural relations of power that condition 'who can speak' is effaced. Indeed, reflexivity is an important beginning point in verbal analysis of 'others' on the part of privileged speakers. To relocate 'rather than only reversing oppositions' analyses must take the researcher's own involvement into account (Spivak, 1999). Such theoretical discussions clarify that men other women as the former hold power. The researcher's responsibility must be taken into account to get the hidden side of the investigation. The case of women in Nepal is not other than a slightly unexplored dominion in the sense that women are othered over the centuries because of existing illogical notion that women are inferior to men and they do not deserve to hold identical positions to men.

The article interrogates unjustifiable and unscientific beliefs that focus on the quandary of Nepalese women. Patriarchy makes women as victims and parasites in almost all respects of life. Traditionally women are represented in negative ways. However, sociologists and anthropologists dig out the traditional image of women. The demand of subaltern studies lies in framing women's plight in negative forms and versions. It shall not solve the problems of women. Rather it will only derogate their entire issue of women marginality. Why women in Nepal are left from the prime discourse is the matter of investigation. Depending upon the information provided by the diverse sources of the government does not help to meet the satisfactory conclusions. Official sources ignore the gender segmentation of the labor market that disadvantages women at the point of entry itself, and decline to acknowledge the composite negotiations made by women of their work and family responsibilities (Nair, 1994). The division of labor based on hierarchal structure in Nepal is biased. Women are given both family responsibilities and professional duties and are expected to participate in the production areas as subordinates to their counterparts. Women are prompt to agree on doing both of them, sometimes deliberately and at other times unwillingly. Women negotiate with either condition for adjustment in patriarchy. Although the negotiable plight of women is not their choice, it is the principle of male-dominated society. Besides, Nair connects this point, "Narratives of marginalization, lost cultural worlds, resounding archival absences and subjugated knowledge-in short, the contracting opportunities for the exercise of female power-by no means exhaust the historical possibilities for women in the Indian subcontinent" (1994). This disproportion between women and men is ubiquitous across the world especially in South Asia. Society exploits female capacity and skills without letting them know that they are sufficiently resourceful and their contribution is highly beneficial to the entire development process.

The overall performance and existence of humanity relies on the economic measures which are tangibly indicators of human development index. Economic deprivation of Nepalese women in primarily isolated parts of Nepal reflects on the class disparity even in the rich families. The class consciousness based on gender disparity is the focus of this paper. It is intertwined to the rubric of subalternity as well. Women's marginalization in Nepal indicates

to their underprivileged status in the economic domain as well. The opportunities they exploit are the determining factors of their status. In the rural Nepal, they have fewer opportunities than their counterparts exploit, which eventually widens the rift between women and men economically. This economic deficiency leads women to stay poor. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1991) has most influentially argued, the construction of the poor, victimized, oppressed 'average third world woman' presumes and promotes the contrasting implicit self-representation of Western women as educated, modern and having control over their bodies (56). The self-representation of women in Nepal is heavily affected because of their marginalized status in the economic realm. As long as women get monetarily independent, their political and social representations cannot become better.

The social pattern determines enslavement of Nepalese women and the magnitude of mobility in the Nepalese context. The degree of mobility influences the level of progress in respect of almost all arenas of life. They especially in the conservative set-ups are dependent upon the decision making of male members at both units familial and societal. As a result their dependency increases. In the very proportion, their marginalization rises up. To reduce the dependency level, the width of independence on the part of women in traditional set up of Nepal should be enhanced. Despite many attempts from diverse agencies and organizations to diminish the disparity based on gender, the substantial changes have not come into reality.

In the field of subaltern politics, on the other hand, mobilization for political interference depended on parallel affiliations such as the conventional organization of affinity and territoriality or on class consciousness depending on the level of the consciousness of the people involved. They were prone to be more sadistic than elite politics. Central to subaltern mobilizations was a notion of confrontation to elite authority. Nepal is a society that has been experiencing the domination of elitism generally led by men at hub of both economic and political powers. Women in both respects though affiliated to the elite class have ever lived the life of subordinates. Subaltern theorists question this incessant unprivileged status of women belonging to any group.

In the context, gender disparity is explicitly influenced by religion and class. Hinduism has engrossed the inherent rights of women by cultivating and making some obligations for women to observe. This process seems to have been repeatedly spearheading since the time immemorial. Reasonably women in urban and economically and socially sound families, the plight of women is a bit more substantial than their allies in the rural and economically rearward social units. In addition to Hindu social system, women having faiths in other religions including Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, their situation is still distressed. Spiritual obligations seem to have proven obstacles in their progress and development.

This gender disparity varies from country to country. Subaltern theorists pursue diverse solutions to women's complications in different contexts. For instance, in *Inessential Woman* (1990), feminist philosopher Elizabeth Spelman examines the texts of founding second wave feminist theorists such as Kate Millet, Shulamith Firestone, Betty Friedan and Mary Daly to illustrate problems connected with preservative analyses of gender and race

that benefit one as more elementary than the other. She argues that as long as race is taken to be self-determining of sex, racism as sovereign of sexism, we are bound to give critically misleading descriptions of gender and sexual relations (117). It becomes prominent for feminism to address “how one form of oppression is experienced is influenced by and influences how another form is experienced” (123). Indeed, the process of oppression in entirety should be analyzed and so as the conclusions can be brought. Political and cultural deprivation of women influences their class domination. The religious independence leads women's affluence and growth. In the open and broad social set-ups, women seem to be experiencing commendable reactions even of men. The control of religion in almost every aspect of Nepalese society is one of the prime reasons of women's backwardness and deficiency.

The dominant role of religion in social and political lives of people in South Asia becomes an obstacle to the progress of women at large. The lessening of this religious impact from the social and cultural life can help to overcome the problems facing women even in Nepal. Rational and practical education can affect the entire lifestyle of people regardless of gender diversity. The level of reasoning capacity determines whether someone chooses to stay dependent or not. Antonia Gramsci interrogates the circle of Marxists that encircles the class issue. Women's life is not only affected by class but many other factors are equally responsible. Gramsci's position is necessarily influential to any student who reaches an understanding of the origin of the notion of the subaltern because it tends to detach itself from the mechanistic and economistic form that narrowly characterizes most of the Marxist traditional studies. The subaltern classes refer essentially in Gramsci's words to any “low rank” person or group of people in an exacting society suffering under hegemonic domination of a ruling elite class that denies them the basic rights of participation in the making of confined history and culture as vigorous individuals of the same nation. Gramsci's intentions when he first used the concept of the subaltern are transparent enough to be given any other incredible understandings.

The class struggle existing between women and men in Nepal can be seen through subaltern concept as postulated by Gramsci. He rationalizes that the subaltern classes have the same many-sided history as that of the hegemonic classes although the latter constitutes the most formally established. The subaltern peoples' history in Gramsci's approach has no evident unity and it seems to be in its very blinking totality because of their submission to the authority of the ruling groups even when they break with the recognized system. This dreadful state of affairs imposed this sort of non-accessibility to the means by which they can constrain representation and accordingly have less access to social and cultural state mechanisms. However, the only possible way from Gramsci's perspective was to reach the state of freedom through continuing victory which inescapably guarantees a dismantling of the master/slave paradigm.

By unearthing the history of deprived women in Nepal, Spivak manages to elaborate genuine discrimination over the subaltern as it was first developed by Ranajit Guha and the others through her original examination of the experiences and struggles of women in

general, either from the upper middle class or the peasantry and sub-proletariat class. She advocates for women as a differentiated gender because of the distasteful exclusion of their participation in confrontation. Spivak argues, "The question is not of female participation in insurgency, or the ground rules of the sexual division of labor, for both of which there is evidence"; rather, both were used as object of colonialist historiography and as a subject of insurgency, though the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant (Habib, 2012). The context of the colonial India reflects the condition of women in Nepal as well as the male domination pervades all levels of society across the country. The lack of partaking of women is perceived. Though drastic changes have come into the societal and political structures of the country over the decades, such transitions are not sufficient. The viability of theoretical changes is not reachable to women in rural part of Nepal because of the deep-rooted traditional practices and superstitions. That is why; more attempts should be made to affect the life of women positively. The subjugated status of women in Nepal can remain a question to the democratic system long time accepted and institutionalized so far. The more power women receive, the better positions they can enjoy.

The double marginalization in South Asia basically for women has become a severe problem in the sense that women first suffer gender discrimination and secondly class that pushes them back in almost every respect of human development. To some extent, women in rural parts experience the ethnic issue as well. However, it does not have much say.

The status of Nepalese is subordinated and subjugated despite many changes in the policies and laws of the country through the amendment of the constitution. This bizarre condition is the byproduct of lack of opportunities and this deprivation from jobs is because more than 60% of women are illiterate. The ratio of their oppression and deprivation differ according to regions, castes, economy, religion, and structure of the community. Spivak suggests that the term 'subaltern' refers to the margins of the course marked out by this epistemic violence, men and women among the illiterate peasantry, the tribals, the lowest strata of the urban sub-proletariat on the other side of the international division of labor form socialized capital. Spivak discloses considerable differences of problems and oppression women experience because of other variables other than gender such as education, social class, religion, and so on. The women of so-called higher castes have been more suppressed though they have got more facilities and opportunities of education and employment. The women of the so-called lower castes have got more freedom than the former ones but they lack opportunities of education and employment. Only few Nepalese women have right to the property. They are hardly invited to making policies and decisions of both family and national affairs.

The people of lower social strata, especially women including the women in the remote parts of Nepal survive the poor economy. Women suffer all of these variables in the Nepalese context. Partha Chatterjee's 1986 book *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World* creatively applied Saidian and postcolonial perspectives to the study of non-Western nationalisms, using India as an example. Kamala Visweswaran distinguishes between the figure of 'woman' as subaltern and the question of subaltern women when considering the

gendering of subalternity. She claims that there are two problems that spot the theorization of gender by the Subaltern Studies group: either gender is subsumed under the categories of caste and class or gender is seen to mark a social group apart from other subalterns (Tejero 2004). Caste and class are interconnected. Caste of a social unit determines the class as well. The people of the so-called upper caste generally hold higher economic and social class. Moreover, Tejero (2004) argues that critics like Foucault and Deleuze announce the death of the subject of traditional humanism in the postmodern episteme, they retain what Spivak sees as a 'utopian' conception of the centered subject/agent in respect to marginalized groups, such as prisoners, women, or the Third World subaltern, who supposedly can speak for themselves despite all their various disadvantages. The backward and oppressed sections of the society cannot speak their problems and moreover, women experience bizarre social conditions but remain silent. Resistance and protests are hardly possible from them because of their underprivileged stratum.

### **Gender inequality is omnipresent in Nepal.**

The notion of male supremacy has been justified, sustained, and continued through different institutions historically. However, the notion has been challenged from time to time through different ways, e.g. writings, songs, and dance. In early 19<sup>th</sup> century, different types of knowledge emerged in understanding social realities (Manandhar and Bhattachan, 2001). Women's studies re-conceptualizes gender relationship to create just and human society. To meet this goal women's studies curriculum has to take on different methods. Manadhar and Bhattachan (2001) argue that the consequences of change in the economic and political sectors on gender relationship, the reaction of women to these changes and the stresses, variance and contradictions that occur both at the macro and micro levels as the result of these changes have to be analyzed. Cultural forces of society very much influence on accepting and internalizing certain social concepts on women and men and their positions in the society. Any endeavor to change gender inequalities in the financial and political area cannot overlook these cultural forces. Political strategies and social norms have been amended as well to convert the poor participation of Nepalese women to the healthy and active participation.

### **Conclusion**

The article has explored challenges posed by patriarchy in Nepal. The effect of religion and superstitions deep-rooted in the country can be seen in almost all aspects of society. The status of women in urban areas is considerably better than those in the remote parts of the country. The educated women lead better lives than those who are neither educated nor of upper class. Their oppressed condition has also become a barrier to the developmental process of the country. The finding is that economy is the major factor that affects their entire participation in public sphere. Even if the government of Nepal has made so many endeavors to bring about drastic change in lives of women regardless of class, caste, ethnicity, and region, the substantial changes can hardly be seen in society at large. Therefore some intense steps for reforming the structure that is still male-dominated must be taken seriously. Consequently, each and every woman can perceive the real change in life.

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