



Vulnerability of Single Women: Issue of Inclusion in Nepalese Households

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Abstract

Background: Concept of single women is not an issue of trauma psychologically and socio-economically in modern household and society, unlike in traditional and patriarchal society. However, it still is a big issue in Nepalese society as well as in academic discourse and development practices, although Nepalese polity is based on postmodernism and has been following western characters. Further, developmental approaches are a proactive gender balanced from top to bottom.

Objective: To examine the relationships between single women, vulnerability level and household structure in rural Nepali society.

Methods: Primary data are collected from household survey by using descriptive statistics.

Results: It finds the emergence and increment of single women due to the conflict in Nepal (1996-2006). Growing foreign employment led to divorces (1999-2019) and natural deaths of male population paving the way for multifaceted vulnerability of single women in nuclear and joint family.

Conclusions: Despite the growth of financial and political independence of single women, vulnerability still is acute in Nepal. It is a barrier to single women's happiness and empowerment.

Implications: Findings of this study can be used by policy makers and concerned authorities to make decisions and take appropriate action.

Keywords: Single women, vulnerability, happiness, empowerment, Nepal

Originality: This is the original paper and is not submitted for publication in other publications

Paper Type: Research paper

JEL Classification: J16, J17, K38

Introduction

The growing number of single women in developing countries has been a big issue. In Nepal, the growth of single women unnaturally increased in the conflict period from 1996 to 2006, along with the existence of natural growth of single women. Then after, the growth of male death in foreign employment has contributed significantly, along with the growth of extra-marital affairs and divorce from 1999 to present. Population Census 2011 and Demographic Statistics 2019 show 6.7 percent (2 million) single women as widows out of total population (29.9 million) and 44 percent single women as household heads (2.3 million) out of 5,423,297 households (CBS, 2019). Despite its decision-making role and contribution, the remaining single women are socio-economically vulnerable in terms of education, health, livelihood, mobility, participation, decision making etc. Therefore, vulnerability of single women is an undesired threat in the course of development policy and practices and also poverty and inequality responses and reduction.

Its reflection can be found in development policy and practices in developing countries, like Nepal, with the assumption that women are socio-economically weak and backward within the household and family, although Nepal Republic Constitution 2015 endorses equal rights to women under Fundamental Rights and Human Rights based on International Human Rights Principles and Democracy norms, values and system. In the political structure and system, inclusive to exclusion approach can be found to empower women's political activism, representation, participation and decision making. In the parliament election, quota approach is used to include women based on two simultaneous modules: constitutional and legal provisions to make guarantee women's rights on resources, property, opportunity, decision making process etc. and empowerment programs including advocacy, skill training, informal literacy, information about women's right, institutional development etc. (UNDP, 1997). Its level is 33 percent from local government level to national level. In local government election, deputy mayor and member are mandatory to women. In 753 local government units (rural and urban municipality), women representations are 40 percent and dalit (marginal) women are 47 percent (AAW HR, 2009). It is an example of miracle women's inclusion as representation, participation and voices in decision making process from local government to the parliament in Nepalese political history. Therefore, the country has a huge expectation on gender balanced development approach, policy and practices.

This natural expectation and aspiration can be seen as the growth of socio-economic empowerment of women, particularly women from dalit communities. The beautiful aspect of this is the transformation of family dynamics, functions, structures and equations on resource accumulation, allocation, distribution and production. For example, the Nepal Living Standards Survey (NLSS) 2011 found that the proportion of people living below the poverty line in Nepal decreased from 31% in 2003-04 to 25% in 2010-11. However, the 2010-11 survey found that Dalits are bearing a much higher burden of poverty (42%) than non-Dalits (23%). Similarly, the Nepal Demographic Health Survey (NDHS) 2011 found that 40% of women in Nepal had no education (i.e. were illiterate), in comparison to only 14% of men, and that 60% of Tarai women had no education, compared to 32% of women in the Hills and Mountains. On an average day, women in Nepal spend just an hour less than men on

income-generating work, while spending three times more time than men on unpaid work (6 hours spent by women compared to 1.5 hours spent by men). Of the 601 members in the Constituent Assembly, only 175 were women. In the civil service, only 10.6% were women in 2014, with the highest majority in a non-gazetted class. In Nepali society, indicators of women empowerment have been found positive: access to knowledge, economic resource and political power as well as their personal autonomy in the process of decision making (UNDP, 1997). However, the NDHS and a recent Asia Foundation survey indicated that between 20% and 50% of Nepali women experienced violence in their lifetime (ADB, 2017). A report of UNDP (2019) on Human Development Index 2019 indicated fast and vast progress of women's socio-economic status in Nepal. In case of literacy, its level is 44.5 percent (CBS, 2019).

Despite accumulation of gender literatures and studies relating to women issues and empowerment in developing countries, particularly in Nepal, single women within a household are identified as a hidden, sensitive and serious issue. There are different literatures conceptualizing single women as a widow, divorcee, separated or an unmarried woman over 35 years (WHO, 2009) and MoL (2015). It was looked on as a simple human right issue related to young single women as harassment issue (WHO, 2003). Parajuli (2008) has a similar note but considers currently divorced, widowed or have always been single, as well as unmarried cohabiters. Thus, single women are the status of women before and after.

Despite existence of a number of single women, Nepali society takes it to be a non-issue in the closed family structure.. Over long decades, such an issue existed as a non-issue. Therefore, it was not much talked about and was not considered an issue of no importance because of its hidden domain, social codes and practices, and its multidimensional factors were misunderstood. If we observe the status of single women, they are blamed as husband eaters and stigmatized as inauspicious and witches (Thapa, 2007). The perspective of family happiness, in Nepali society, was closed within the house and the concepts of women status and women empowerment were not the mainstream discourse. . Besides it, there were poor communication and networks and not adequate theories were developed to address the issues of single women's empowerment.

Recent growing literature (WHO, 2009, ADB, 2010 and MoL, 2015) on women in developing countries have extended their serious attention on socio-economic status of single women and their vulnerability level within family, and house. Development approaches argue for the need of women empowerment for household prosperity and welfare. Such approach has been followed in each and every activity of development conducted by the government and the non-government agency. Its major concern is to reduce the vulnerability level of single women because the vulnerability of single women is the byproduct of discriminatory and avoidant behavior to women. Therefore, it receives top priority on the government activities and budget allocation for their economic empowerment. Similarly, the gender approaches argue it as the result of gender discrimination created by social codes, norms and values of traditional society. It explains her state as psychological and socio-economic trauma to woman's livelihood and prosperous happy life (UNW, 2017). In many countries where patriarchal values prevail, a woman is considered worthless and inauspicious once she becomes a widow. For many women, widowhood brings with it not just the shock and trauma of losing one's husband but also

losing their home, being abandoned by family members and increased sexual vulnerability if she is young and bleak future for her children as well (UNW, 2017).

In Nepal, different studies point our early marriage as one of the prime cause for the increase in the number of single women. Early marriage reduces life time for education and other ability earning. Bernstein (2006) notes that most single women have early marriage by dropping their schooling. Further, he argues that single woman has obstacles of ability including employment, access to the market, skill trainings break out the cycle of poverty. Furthermore, her inability and independence make herself marginal and silent against any exploitation. Giri(2000) explains her problems such as sexual harassment. She cannot react publicly and privately due to fear of losing job, of livelihood source and of social status and feelings of shame. Fact and figures indicate 66 percent verbal abuse and 33 percent emotional abuse (UNICEF, 2001). Its example can be found in the following districts such as Bara, Dhanusha, Doti, Jumla, and Rautahat where a high rate of crimes against women and children, including human trafficking, exists. Its forms are rape, domestic violence, polygamy, alleged witchcraft, child abuse, child marriage, and trafficking (ADB, 2010). In addition, out of 57 percent women, only 11 percent of single women in Nepal are literate (CBS, 2011). Lohani and K.C. (2001) mention that single women are usually deprived of their husband's property and left to face discrimination, stigma, forcing them into poverty. Thus, the issue of single woman is considered a complicated issue that needs to be urgently addressed.

In this regard, the rights of single women have been recognized and prioritized. Still, a large number of single women in rural areas have been suffering from marginalization, sexual violence and vulnerability to different sorts of economic deprivations. However, only a few research studies have focused on the single woman and its vulnerability. Therefore, this paper aims at assessing the vulnerability of single woman within household in the society in Nepal.

This paper is organized into following sections. Section 1 presents the background of the study, Section 2 explains material and method consisting of techniques of collecting primary data (household survey and focused group discussion (FGD) and study area . Section 3 presents results and discussion of the case of single woman in Nepal and Section 4 concludes the major findings of the study.

Research Method

This study follows case study method based on explorative and descriptive research design to assess the vulnerability level of single women and its capacity building and micro finance impacts on rural village in Nepal by studying case of Ramkot and Bhimdhunga Gaunpalika. The data sets of this study are both primary and secondary. In case of Primary Data of Individual's perspective and responses, household survey was conducted in the selected gaunpalikas. The sample selection method followed the principle of random sampling method in which out of total single women population (261 as recorded in two gaunpalikas), about 15 percent sample (that is 40 single women) was selected. In case of household selection, lottery method was used after numbering households in above gaunpalikas. The sample was interviewed with structured questionnaire. The secondary data was collected from CBS (2001),

Kathmandu District Office (2015), Ramkot Village Development Office (2013), Bhimdhunga Village Development Office (2013) and other relevant sources such as women's profile of CBS (2011).

Study Area

Two *gaunpalikas* Ramkot and Bhindhunga of Kathmandu Districts were selected as the study area for this study. These *gaunpalikas* are located 10 km far to the western side of Kathmandu Metropolitan City (figure 1).

The *gaunpalika* of Ramkot has the area of 5.8 square kilometers and has 1,937 households and a population of 8,759 (CBS, 2011). Family size is 4.52 that are lower than national family size of 5. By sex, there is 50.2 percent male and 49.8 percent female. It is little bit reverse with national sex ratio. There is a single woman of 2 percent at VDC level (RVDC, 2013).

Similarly, the *gaunpalika* of Bhindhunga has the area of 6.1 square kilometers with 619 households and a population of 2,915 (CBS, 2011). Family size is 4.71 i.e., lower than national family size of 5 and greater than Ramkot. By sex, there is 50.9 percent male and 49.1 percent female. It is little bit reverse with national sex ratio. There are 2.8 percent single women in Bhimdhunga (BVDC, 2013).

Figure 1: Location and Map of the study areas



Data Analysis and Result

Socio economic characters

HH size and structure:

Single women are socio economically vulnerable. In other words, they are the poor households. In general, nuclear households have smaller family size than the joint ones. There are family sizes of 3.75 less than national average family size of 5.4 (CBS, 2011). In case of the joint and poor families of single women, there is outlier of 8 person's family size in maximum. It may be a good source of labor endowment. In minima, there is outlier of 1-person family size (Table2).

Similarly, sex factor is another character of single women's HH in which female in mean (2.37) dominates highly to male in mean (1.37). In minima, there is found zero male. In max-

ima, female's representation of 5 in HH is greater than male's (4)

Table 1: Socio economic characters of single women

Socio-economic character of single woman	min	max	mean	standard deviation
Age (years)	39	71	53.48	10.04
Female Head in Household/family	0	1	0.38	0.49
Age Group(years)				
Below 60	39	59	44.4	
60-70	60	67	59	
Above 70	70	71	70.5	

Source: *Field Survey, 2017*

(Table-2).

Age distribution of single women is found in minima of 39 years and in maxima of 71 years. Its mean age is 53.48 years. When its age distribution is categorized into below 60, 60 to 70 and above 70, there is found 62.5 percent HH, 32.5 percent HH and 5 percent HH respectively (Table-1).

Female Head in HH has decisive factor in decision making process within family and households. Females headed 38 percent households (Table-1). It reflects size of nuclear family also.

Table 2: Household size and structure

Household size and structure	min	max	mean	standard deviation
Sex				
Male	0	4	1.37	1.08
Female	1	5	2.37	1.18
Family Size	1	8	3.75	2.01
No of Children	0	4	1.12	0.91

Source: *Field Survey, 2017*

Resources Endowments

There are two major resource endowments: landholding and livestock presented in Table-3. In land, there are two characters: irrigational and non-irrigational. Each household holds 1.72 ropani (0.087 hectare) in average in irrigational land and 1.92 ropani (0.097 hectare) in average in non-irrigational land. In sum, each household holds 3.62 ropani (0.184 hectare) in average. In case of non-irrigational land, each household has challenges. Similarly, there are two categories of livestock — cows and goats. Each household traditionally farms two cows in maxima only for milk and composite fertilizers and four goats in maxima only for milk and meat production. In practice, livestock is attaché of traditional Nepalese households, like as single women's household (Table-3).

Socio economic character of single women

A single woman is vulnerable to different sorts of violence and deprivation within the family in the societies of Nepal. To understand their socio-economic status, indicators such as food sufficiency, economic and social indicators are taken into considerations. Education is a social indicator that indicates capacity of single women. There are just two categories: just

literate (who can read, sign and write her name) and illiterate (who cannot read, sign and write her name, except understanding Nepali language). Literate and illiterate single women comprise 50 percent each. In case of economic condition, there are three categorizations: rich, relatively poor and poor. There are 45 percent well off rich group. Then, there are 55 percent of the poor i.e. poor (32.5 percent) and the ultra-poor (22.5 percent) in sum (Table-4).

Table-3: Landholding and Livestock endowments

Landholding and livestock	min	max	mean	standard deviation
Landholding (Ropani)				
Irrigational land	0	3	1.72	1.08
No irrigational land	0	4	1.92	1.18
Livestock (No)				
Cows	0	2	0.3	0.52
Goats	0	4	2.15	1.09

Source: Field Survey, 2017

Similarly, food sufficiency categorizes poverty level by dividing four groups of food sufficiency-based months: less than 3 months, less than 6 months, less than 9 months and less than 12 months and equivalent. There are 22.5 percent less than 3 months, 10 percent less than 6 months, 10 percent less than 9 months and 57.5 percent less than 12 months and equivalent (Table-4)

Table -4: HH categories in socioeconomic characters

HH categories	HH No	min	max	mean	standard deviation
Food Sufficiency	40	2	12	8.75	3.84
< 3 months	9				
<6 months	4				
<9 months	4				
<12 months	23				
Economic					
Poor	13				
Ultra-poor	9				
Rich	18				
Literacy	40	0	1	0.5	0.506
Education					
Literate	20				
Illiterate	20				
Sex					
Male		0	4	1.37	1.08
Female		1	5	2.37	1.18

Source: Field Survey, 2017

Poverty and Vulnerability level of Single women

Vulnerability is a state of inability to self-protection and recovery from social, economic and natural shocks. Scholars (Aysen, 1993; Philip and Rayhan, 2004; and UNW, 2017)) identify its causes: illiteracy, hunger, fragile and hazardous location, gender discrimination, no access to resources and decision-making process.

With poverty, Philip and Rayhan (2004) argue that despite different implications of poverty and vulnerability, poverty is generally associated with deprivation of health, education, food, knowledge, influence over one's environment etc. It creates vulnerability. The poor are more vulnerable than any other group to health hazards, economic down turns, natural catastrophes and even man-made violence, along with shocks (illness, injury and loss of livelihood) (Klasen and Povel, 2013). Christiansen and Subbarao (2005) Abuka, Atingi-Ego, Opolot and Okello (2007) and Calvo and Dercon (2007, 2013) note that high incidence of poverty contributes to significant amounts of insecurity in the people. Thus, poverty and vulnerability level are correlated each other (Whelan and Maitre, 2005; Chakravarty, 2006; Abraham and Kumar, 2008; Chiwaula, Witt and Waibel, 2011 Calvo, 2008, 2013; Gallardo, 2013; Günther and Maier, 2014; Feeny and McDonald, 2016 and UNW, 2017).

Measure of poverty level

There are different reference lines of poverty level based on different approaches at household level. One of well used and popular approach is the reference of 12 months of food sufficiency. If household meets 12 months food sufficiency, such household is categorized no poverty. However, less than 12 months food sufficiency measures extremity of poverty level. There are three extreme reference points: less than 12 months, less than 9 months, less than 6 months and less than 3 months. Table 5 shows distribution of households and single women. Out of 100 percent single women HH, there is 57.5 percent single woman having less than 12 months food sufficiency in which 22.5 percent less than 3 months is more highly vulnerable, 10 percent less than 6 months is highly vulnerable, 10 percent less than 9 months is vulnerable and 14 percent less than 12 months is less vulnerable than of less than 9 months, less than 6 months and less than 3 months food sufficiency.

Table-5: Food Sufficiency

HH categories	HH No	Mean HH size	< 12 months	12 months
Economic				
Poor	13		13	
Relatively poor	9		9	
Rich	18			18
Literacy	40	3.75	20	20

Source: *Field Survey, 2017*

Measure of vulnerability level: There are different approaches and factors measuring level of vulnerability. Above poverty level shows us the vulnerability level of single women. In addition, there are applied the following factors as supplementary factors to poverty: social factors (discrimination and exclusion), sexual harassment, and emotional torture, no access to

resources (land, money, information, organization etc.), no participation in household decision making process and no participation in community decision making process (see its details in table 6). There are two cases: nuclear family and joint family. In 38 percent of nuclear families, where a female is the head, no social discriminations and exclusion have been found. This is because, within these households, single women have a right to take decisions and are free to access to resources. In this case, a single woman is less vulnerable from social factors. However, there have been more reports of sexual harassments for nuclear families because these single women have more freedom and have more external activities.

In case of joint families, males are the head, following the social codes, norms and values. Therefore, single women are found to be less free unlike nuclear families. Single women are not considered as good fortune. Therefore, they are excluded from every socio-religious activity. In case of food and clothes, they are discriminated. In this case, 62.5 percent single women in the joint family are perceived to be socially discriminated and excluded. Except for a few cases, out of 62.5 percent, about 50 percent of single women have faced emotional torture, no access to resources, no participation in household decision making processes and community level decision making processes. In case of sexual harassment, except for a 25 percent of single women, 38 percent single women have faced no sexual harassment because single women are not allowed to work outside and they have more male protection. However, if we observe the level of vulnerability, the vulnerability of single women in the joint family headed by males is higher than in the nuclear family headed by females. Majority of single women are extremely vulnerable from poverty.

Table 6: Vulnerability level of Single Women

Vulnerability Indicator	Nuclear Family		Joint Family		Total
	Yes	No	Yes	No	
Social					
Discrimination	0	15	25	0	40
Exclusion	0	15	25	0	40
Sexual Harassment	15	0	10	15	40
Emotional Torture	0	15	20	5	40
No Access to Resources	0	15	20	5	40
No Participation in Household Decision Making	0	15	22	3	40
No Participation in Community Decision Making		15	19	6	40
Total	15	90	141	34	280

Source: Field Survey, 2017

Conclusion

This paper analyzes vulnerability of single women in Nepal based on primary data, through descriptive statistics. As a result, female heads (38%) have power to take decisions within the family and the household in nuclear families but literacy rate is only 50 percent. Out of all the total females, 55 percent are poor. Out of the total number of females, 57.5 percent of single women have less than 12 months of food supplies. Within this, 22.5 percent get less than 3

months of food supply and are most vulnerable. 10 percent of women, who get less than 6 months, are highly vulnerable. 10 percent, who get less than 9 months, are vulnerable and 14 percent of women, who get less than 12 months, are least vulnerable in terms of food sufficiency. It is made complicated by social discrimination and exclusion in family decisions and activities. In the female-head nuclear families, single women have a right to take decisions in which single women are free to access resources and participate in decision making processes within households and in the communities. In this case, a single woman is less vulnerable from social factors as well. However, in case of sexual harassment, single women are susceptible because they have to perform not only internal activities but also external activities like male members of the society. In case of a joint family, a single woman is excluded from every socio-religious activity. In terms of food, clothing, etc., she is discriminated. In this case, 62.5 percent single women in the joint families think that they are socially discriminated and excluded. Except for a few cases, out of 62.5 percent, about 50 percent of single women think they feel emotional torture, difficulties in accessing resources, discrimination in participating in household decision making process and community level decision making process as well. In case of sexual harassment, except 25 percent of single women, 38 percent of them feel no sexual harassment because these single women don't need to work outside and they have male protection. Single women in joint families headed by men feel more protected than the single women in nuclear family headed by women. The level of vulnerability in terms of poverty of single women is very high. Thus, the vulnerability level of single women in the different social structure of family in the society is still extreme not only in joint but also in nuclear families because of their exclusion. Both in terms of theoretical and empirical studies it is related to the notion of inclusiveness, family structure and empowerment of women as a whole, along with policy formulation and implementation, law formulation and institutional reforms, etc. Therefore, single women and their vulnerability should be agenda in women empowerment, development and governance of the state from the central to the local governments for achieving SDG 2030's Goals: Goal 1: No Poverty, Goal 2: No Hunger, Goal 5: Gender Equality and Goal 8: Decent work and economic growth.

Conflict of Interest

Authors have declared that no conflicting interests exist.

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