The Need for Social Empowerment of Women: An Elephant in the Room?
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Background
Gender inequality remains one of the key challenges in our pursuit of a sustainable society. In Nepal, discrimination against women remains a norm - in some cases the discrimination is obvious and extreme (example: gender based violence, Chhaupadi system) while is present in a more subtle form in others (example: general acceptance of asymmetrical power relations between men and women at household level). Much of the efforts intended at eliminating gender-based discriminations remain concentrated on pursuing economic empowerment for women. The underlying assumption is that economic empowerment will automatically lead to women’s social and political empowerment. However, emerging evidences suggest that the process of economic empowerment may in fact be hindered by a lack of agency and social empowerment among women. In this article, building on past works and ongoing debates around the measures of gender equality and empowerment, I intend to better understand different dimensions and drivers of women empowerment.

Gender and Development in Nepal
Nepal government started incorporating women development into its development plans since the 1980s, precisely since the Sixth Development Plan. In the early years, women development efforts were primarily driven by the government’s interest in reducing fertility rate (population control) and in enabling women to contribute to the country’s economic development. Over the decades since the 1980s, there has been a shift in the global understanding of development from being synonymous to economic growth, to being a function of environmental integrity, economic development and social justice. The development policies and programmes in the recent times suggest the above shift in thinking around development, and are reflective of the notion that women are not just potential contributors to the labour force and economic development, but their voice and participation in leadership roles are fundamental to policy-making and development processes. The approach paper for the 15th Five-year Plan (2019-2024) of Nepal embodies this notion; the plan aims to ensure equal and meaningful participation of women at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public domains. Yet, the indicators of women empowerment suggest the need for more works to improve women’s situation in Nepal.
What do indicators say and do not say?

Indicators and targets are important reference points that serve as measures of programmes and policies’ impact, effectiveness and success. However, the above line should be read with caution as not every country/institution may be using the right set of indicators to measure its progress toward gender equality and women empowerment. In Nepal, education, labor force participation, and participation in leadership roles are often used as key indicators of women empowerment. In this section, I will discuss how Nepal is faring in terms of the foregoing indicators, and about their association with women’s status in the society.

Level of education

In majority of gender equality and women empowerment indices, level of education is included as one of the key indicators. The underlying assumption is that an educated woman is more likely and capable of pursuing her agency and well-being goals. According to the 2016 Nepal Demographic and Health Survey (MoH 2016), only 50 percent of women between the age of 15-49 had completed secondary or higher level of education. Ratio of girls’ enrolment in technical and vocational education remains low at 0.53. Interestingly though, the University Grants Commission 2016 reported that among the students who enrolled for higher education, over 50 percent were female. A number of studies have shown a positive association between women’s education and children’s health, lower fertility rate, greater participation in labor force and in their ability to take action against discriminatory practices. Recent surveys in Nepal also suggest that fertility rate is lower and reproductive health better among women with higher level of education. Education is a tool that enables a person to access and avail of the information and knowledge around him or her. It also increases one’s career options and capacity to make life choices, and hence can contribute to his/her economic empowerment. However, the level of impact of education on women’s agency¹ and their status in the society depends on numerous other social elements.

Women’s role in household decisions is generally viewed as an indicator of their status within households. The Nepal DHS 2016 survey revealed that about 34 percent of educated (i.e. completed SLC or above) married women (15-49) do not participate in making decision about their own health care; about 47 percent has no say in decisions about major household purchases; and 43 percent of them have to rely on someone else in the family to make decision about visiting families or relatives. This implies, a number of educated married women remain excluded from making even minor decisions at household levels. The figure is way lower for women with lower level of education.

The DHS 2016 revealed a negative association between level of education and experience of violence among women. However, percentage of women who experienced at least one kind of violence over the past 12 months was found higher among employed group. Majority of women who reported of having experienced at least one kind of violence suggested that the perpetrator was from within the family. The survey also revealed that level of education and employment status had limited influence on help-seeking behavior among women (15-49 years) who ever experienced physical or sexual violence (MoH 2016). The above findings suggest a general lack of agency even among educated and employed women.

Women in the labour market

It is generally understood that having a paid job and income of their own allows women to make important finance and resource decisions. Interestingly, Nepal has one of the highest labor force participation (i.e. 83 percent; ADB Briefs October 2016) in Asia. However, there is a huge gender disparity within the labour market. According to the Nepal Labour Force Survey 2018, male to female ratio of working age population is 100:125, however, male to female ratio of employed population is 100:59. Men outnumber women in all sectors, except agriculture, forestry and fishery. Also, on average a man in Nepal earns NRs. 6000 per month more than a woman for the same position (CBS 2018). Furthermore, of the total employed women, over 90 percent are associated with informal employment. Informal employment refers to jobs that are not ‘incorporated or registered with authorities’ (CBS 2018; pp. 25). This implies, women with informal employment work under vulnerable conditions, often with no paid annual leave or sick leave benefits, and their employers may not contribute to their social security as they do in case of formal employment. It is generally acknowledged that women are the key contributors to the delivery of health services, but statistics suggest that women are more likely to be in caring roles (often unpaid) and less likely to be employed as doctors or managers (WHO 2019). Similarly, women are often expected to be the primary cooks and resource (energy, water, land, etc.) managers at household levels, yet women are often excluded from making major household purchase decisions. Outside home, women lack a level playing field in almost all professional sectors.

¹ In gender literature, agency refers to people’s capacity to define their own life-choices and to pursue their own goals, even in the face of opposition from others (Kabeer 1999).
as employment and is basically an unpaid work, is still widely considered women’s responsibility. The Sustainable Development Goals Baseline Report 2017 suggests that women spend on average 14 hours a day on unpaid domestic works (NPC 2017). Putting the burden of unpaid care works entirely upon women leaves them with little time to participate in productive and income generating activities that could ultimately contribute to their economic empowerment and agency.

Work-family conflict has become a common challenge among working couples of today’s generation. It can be even worse for women when there is unequal division of labor at home or unfair gender expectation that demands women, employed or not, to be in charge of household chores. A number of studies have revealed that women’s increased participation in social and economic activities outside homes may put further pressure on women (Rijal and Wasti 2018; Poudel 2019; Regmi 2019), which is perhaps why some of the scholars have rightly termed working women’s participation in household (unpaid) works and education/trainings as the second and the third shifts respectively (Morgan and Winkler 2019; Sanchez 2015). A number of studies and the author’s communication with married working women have revealed that many working women, despite of having a decent income, may still lack agency to make decisions regarding self-care, and struggle alone to strike a balance between their life and work (Regmi 2019; Poudel 2019; author’s communication with working women in medical, development and education sectors). Playing multiple roles in life can be mentally, emotionally and physically draining; this is becoming a common issue among working women of today’s generation. This is unlikely to change for the women of the future generations if with increasing participation of women outside home, we fail to adjust roles and expectations for men and women inside our homes.

Women in leadership roles


Many argue that the little representation of women in the government bodies at local level had been possible only due to the mandates of the Election Commission that required 40 percent of the seats be reserved for women (Limbu 2018; Paswan 2017). It also required political parties to field one woman candidate either for chair or deputy chair position for each municipality. Despite these mandates, out of 753 chair positions available, women occupy only two percent of the chair positions in municipalities across the country (Paswan 2017). A survey of 190 women elected representatives in 2017 revealed that, political parties encouraged the majority of the respondents (i.e. 47 percent) to run for the election; only nine percent of the surveyed women elected representatives suggested that they participated in the election of their own accord (TAF 2018).

Policy mandates have allowed many women, especially those from marginalized groups, to hold important seats in government bodies. However, effectiveness of such
policies in improving women’s status in the society remains uncertain. Women’s inclusion and participation in political and public spheres seem driven majorly by top-down policy mandates and international commitments, but general acknowledgement of women as equal member of the society as men still seems lacking in almost all sectors. Majority of elected representatives at local government have ‘a very limited understanding of GESI concept and its operationalization’ (TAF 2018; pp. 22). There is a perception among women as well as men representatives that women are generally incapable of participating in leadership roles and running the government. On the other hand, men are generally considered ‘natural leaders’ and ‘competent’ to run the government (TAF 2018). This essentially suggests the internalization of patriarchy and gender stereotypes even among the ones who are expected to eradicate such biases against women from the society. Unless this changes, it does not make sense to expect political leaders to create social transformation toward gender equality.

Resources and Agency for GESI

Exclusionary practices, patriarchy and general perception that women are inherently less competent than men have indiscriminately affected women from all income groups, education and ethnic backgrounds in Nepal and many other nations. This suggests that gender inequality is a more complex issue than previously thought. There remain many women (even in privileged societies) who struggle on a daily basis to get their voices heard, despite their access to various resources. Needless to say, access to resources such as education, information, energy, natural resources, health services, finance and equal opportunities to make decision are crucial for women empowerment. However, the above analyses suggest that even women with access to resources and opportunities may still lack agency to use them to their benefits and personal growth. Therefore, in addition to ensuring access to resources and opportunities, direct interventions to enhance women’s voice and to enable their agency are as crucial. These interventions may be delivered at individual as well as societal level. In the following paragraphs, I use a popular framework that helped me and believe will help the readers as well, to conceptualize the process of women empowerment, and visualize the areas where intervention is needed to allow gender equality to prevail in the society.

Gender-at-Work Analytical Framework, introduced by Rao et al. (2016), portrays women empowerment as an outcome of the interplay between an individual’s access to

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resources, his/her consciousness and behavior, formal rules and policies, and informal traditions, norms and practices (see schematic representation of the framework above). Although the framework was originally designed to evaluate gender equality situation at work or within organizations; the underlying concept is useful in understanding key dimensions (individual/systematic and formal/informal) of gender empowerment and factors that hinder or aid it. It highlights the areas that must change for facilitating the process of women empowerment at work and elsewhere in the society. The good news is some noticeable changes have happened on those fronts in the recent time (example: legislations that outlaw the practice of Chhaupadi, child marriage and witchcraft allegations; reservations for marginalized groups and women in leadership roles). On the other hand, components on the left two quadrants have more to do with social empowerment of women, and need some more works. They are more complex as they demand individual as well as societal acknowledgement of the existence of gender discrimination; they entail questioning the discriminatory systematic informal norms, traditions and structures; and negating exclusionary practices that bar women from exercising their agency and standing on an equal footing with men. Social empowerment of women involves allowing women to raise their voices when they face discrimination; allowing women to participate in any event whether they are menstruating or not; giving equal and equitable opportunity to women at home and work; promoting fair division of labor within and outside households; and allowing women to feel empowered in every aspect. Deliberate efforts on the above fronts at every level (political, societal, professional, household, and individual) are central to enabling women to break the cocoon of gender expectations and stereotypes.

This is important to enable women to convert their access to technologies, finances, natural resources, efficient and modern energy, knowledge, information and learning opportunities into positive outcomes.

**Conclusion**

Concerted efforts at policy-making levels are crucial to create an equitable society and to improve women’s access to resources (education, clean and modern energy, natural amenities, health service, finances etc.), and increase economic and leadership opportunities for women. Equally important are effective implementation of the gender-friendly policies, and questioning and making grounds on discriminatory traditions and norms at micro levels for social transformation. It is also important to note that effective implementation of GESI policies entails stringent regulations, regular monitoring, regulated system of sanctions, and the ownership of the policies by the ones for whom they have been formulated. Power dynamics and gender expectations at household levels can largely influence the outcomes of GESI related policies in all sectors, including energy, community development, education and employment sectors. Development programmes and policies’ failure to recognize micro-level gender expectations and power asymmetries, and their focus only on narrow indicators of gender equality (such as education, female labour force participation, health and the occupation of leadership roles by women) may produce achievements, but only limited long-term impacts.
The Gender Energy and Water Network (GEWNet) was established in Nepal as an output of the National Consultative Workshop held in August 2002. It was initiated with support from ENERGIA, International Network on Gender and Sustainable Energy. The network hosted by Centre for Rural Technology, Nepal (CRT/N) is currently a partner of Green and Inclusive Energy (GIE) Programme, which is financially supported by ENERGIA/Hivos. In Nepal, CRT/N has worked as a lead organization that has implemented the programme with policy support from the Alternative Energy Promotion Centre (AEPCC), and in partnership with National Association of Community Electricity Users Nepal (NACEUN), Indoor Air Pollution and Health Forum (IAPHF), Nepal Forum of Environmental Journalists (NEFEJ), Renewable Energy Consideration of Nepal (RECON) and Practical Action Nepal.

This network focuses on specific lobby and advocacy for promoting clean energy for men, women, and marginalized groups for both domestic and productive uses. It also contributes to the initiatives of the Government of Nepal related to

» Clean Cooking Solutions for All (CCS4All) by 2030
» Sustainable Development Goals (UN declaration) and
» Objectives and targets outlined in the Energy White Paper

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(The views expressed in the article do not necessarily reflect views of the organization)