

Women's Development in Nepal: The Myth of Empowerment

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The status of Nepalese women—and rural women in particular—lags far behind that of men. The strong bias in favor of sons in the country means that daughters are discriminated against from birth and do not have equal opportunities to achieve development. The situation for women is characterized by low levels of access to education, healthcare, and economic, social, and political opportunities. Despite increasing efforts from the government, non-governmental organizations, and international development agencies to empower women in Nepal, there has been little improvement in the socio-economic status

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Development in Nepal remains impossible unless women achieve equal footing with men in the development process. Gender-based inequalities in access to healthcare, education, ownership of assets,

and economic and social mobility are still profound. For example, the literacy rate for women is 30 percent, but for men the rate is twice as high at 66 percent.¹ Many poor rural families consider education for girls as a needless burden. In poor households, parents prefer to pay for their sons' education and keep their daughters at home to help their overburdened mothers.² Labor and physical exploitation of young girls is widespread. In addition, gender-based violence is often reported in domestic as well as public arenas and is largely attributed to derogatory attitudes towards women, which is reinforced by low socioeconomic status.³

The maternal mortality rate of Nepalese women, associated with adolescent pregnancies and poor health services, is among the highest in the world. Recent studies reveal that one out of every thirty-two pregnant women die due to pregnancy and child-birth related complications.⁴ According to the Gender Development Index (GDI),⁵ socioeconomic conditions for Nepalese women are worse than for other South Asian women.⁶ Moreover, women remain far behind men in Nepal according to the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM).⁷ Indeed, women's participation in politics is only one-fifth that of men, and the same pattern prevails in professional occupations and administrative jobs. Although a substantial proportion of women, around 40 percent, is economically active, many are unpaid family workers involved in subsistence agriculture.⁸

To raise the status of women in Nepal and push forward the country's economic development, government and development organizations have

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focused their efforts on empowering women. The concept of empowerment rests on awareness-raising, capacity building, and organizing people in order to overcome unequal relationships, in addition to increasing women's decision-making power at the household, community, and national levels.

The concept of empowerment as used by many development agencies refers mainly to entrepreneurial self-reliance. It places an emphasis on individualistic values: "people empowering themselves by pulling themselves up by their bootstraps."⁹ John Friedmann, author of *Empowerment: The Politics of Alternative Development*, promotes a much broader understanding of empowerment than those focusing on the entrepreneurial self-reliance of individuals.¹⁰ His definition of empowerment includes three different aspects of power: social, political, and psychological. Social power means having access to resources such as information, knowledge, and skills. Political power refers to participation in decision-making—in particular, those decisions that affect a person's own future. Psychological power is defined by an individual's sense of potency and self-esteem, which may positively influence his or her access to social and political power.

To apply theory to practice, the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) has developed a broader women's empowerment framework focusing on five levels of equality:

1. Welfare: addressing the basic needs of women without considering the structural causes. At this point women are viewed as passive beneficiaries of welfare benefits. This is the first step toward empowerment.
2. Access: providing women access to resources such as schooling and micro-credit. Access helps women to progress in meaningful ways.
3. Conscientization: helping women to recognize the problems caused by existing socio-cultural arrangements, and their roles and rights to deal with inequalities.
4. Participation: encouraging women to take part in decision-making and working collectively to gain political representation.
5. Control: the final stage of empowerment where the balance of power between men and women is equal and the contributions of women are fully recognized. At this stage

women have the independence to make decisions regarding their bodies, fertility, birth spacing, and the lives of their children.

This empowerment framework helps development practitioners determine the point of intervention so as to achieve higher levels of equality and the empowerment of women.

The empowerment approach, which is fundamental to an alternative development philosophy, places an emphasis on autonomous decision-making for communities, local self-reliance, direct democracy, and experiential social learning. The starting point for empowerment must be at the grassroots level, because civil society is most readily mobilized around local issues. The major goal of empowerment is to achieve

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equality through transforming the structures, systems, and institutions that have maintained inequality.

In the case of Nepal, the process of women's empowerment involves many dimensions, including: "increasing access to economic opportunities and resources; strengthening political power through women's organizations, solidarity, and collective action; raising consciousness about the symptoms and causes of prevalent oppressive religious, economic, cultural, familial, and legal practices; and strengthening women's self confidence."¹¹

Economic empowerment involves gaining control over productive resources and enabling women to make independent financial decisions. Women in Nepal have already realized the need to be involved in the economic sphere as a means to supplement the household income and gain a certain level of independence. However, these women are mainly relegated to low-skill, repetitive jobs in the industrial sector. This is because of a lack of education and training opportunities, employer biases, and limited

mobility due to family responsibilities.¹² According to the Nepalese constitution, women should enjoy equal rights to employment and equal pay for similar jobs, but this is rare in practice.

Political empowerment aims to propel women into offices where they can formulate, execute, and monitor policies and laws. A critical mass of women, at least one-third of the total of political representatives, needs to be at every level of decision-making. However, women have extremely limited power at the decision and policy-making levels of political bodies, as well as in government bureaucracy. Although almost all political parties have formed women's caucuses, no organizations have been able to put gender issues onto the political agenda in more than a rhetorical way. Disappointingly, they have been unable to provide moral and financial support to women who are interested in becoming involved in politics. In addition, women rarely get family support to go into political careers unless the woman's family has a strong background in politics.

Psychological empowerment aims to increase women's self-esteem and confidence to encourage greater participation in political and social domains.¹³ In Nepalese society, parents treat daughters as the property of others, while parents-in-law see daughters-in-law as a curse. Women who get divorced to escape oppressive marriages or who are abandoned or widowed by their husbands have no social status.¹⁴ Men take control over women's bodies and lives.¹⁵ Women are forced to take care of children while performing backbreaking household chores. In addition, women have no control over the decisions regarding household, community, and political activities. These factors add up to low self-esteem among Nepalese women.

The government of Nepal has implemented several initiatives to empower women. Shortly following the fourth world conference on women held in Beijing in September 1995, the government established the Ministry of Women and Social Welfare (MWSW) to champion women's issues. The MWSW is a leading agency for the advancement of women through empowerment. The roles and responsibilities of the ministry are to strengthen advocacy, coordination, and support for women's groups in various ministries. The MWSW has set three objectives for the empowerment of women: mainstreaming

gender, eliminating gender inequality, and empowering women along the lines proposed by the Beijing Platform for Action.¹⁶

Meanwhile, the activism of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Nepal has increased tremendously and a number of NGO networks have been formed. The Woman's Pressure Group, for example, is comprised of 84 NGOs of various categories. Other networks are issue-oriented and focus on advocacy or specific agendas such as media, HIV/AIDS, and trafficking.¹⁷ One typical example of an NGO working for women's empowerment is the Women's Foundation of Nepal (WF), which works to amend laws that prohibit greater involvement of women in politics. The WF also acts as a networking center and emergency shelter and offers job training, micro-credit loans, and literacy classes.¹⁸ To raise awareness of women's issues, the WF stages seminars, workshops, street plays, and rallies. Despite the increasing NGO activity, most NGOs are urban based and have been less effective in mobilizing rural women for their enhancement and empowerment initiatives.

Both multilateral and bilateral external funding agencies have played a positive role in addressing gender issues in development. Since the Beijing conference, voices have been raised to empower women and engender a fundamental change in socio-economic structures.

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economic structures. Multilateral agencies see women's problems as part of a larger problem of poverty and concentrate on these issues to achieve efficiency of resource use and thereby combat poverty.¹⁹

Women lack human rights and in many ways are second-class citizens. Social discrimination against women is tightly connected to legal provisions, which deprive women from getting equal opportunities as men. Under Nepalese law, a woman's access to land and property is derived through her marriage

relationship. Although the property rights bill was passed recently, providing equal rights to parental properties for unmarried daughters, it still does not protect women's independence since they have to return such parental properties after they get married.²⁰ While the bill provides a share of a husband's property to those who are divorced and those who are widowed, these provisions are only helpful to those who are capable of accessing legal services. If a husband leaves his first wife and marries another woman—a common event in the Nepalese social milieu even though it is illegal—the first wife loses all access to communal property as well.²¹

Women's access to credit is limited because all formal lending institutions seek tangible collateral for loans and women have little access to inherited property. Women's access to institutional credit is further restricted by their confinement to household activities.²² Access to credit is important, as women have few opportunities in the formal labor market and women who are employed as wage laborers are paid less than men. According to 1991 census data, more than 36 percent of the female population was catego-

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rized as homemakers and dependents. While home-making activities are essential for the survival of the household, they fall outside the formal economy.²³

The government's attempts to empower women have been limited. The present constitution has made it mandatory for all political parties to field women as at least five percent of all candidates for election to the House of Representatives, as well as for the House of Representatives to elect at least three women members to the National Assembly. The Local Development Act has also made it mandatory for Village Development Committees to field at least one female candidate in each ward committee. Although women occupy positions at the ward level, their influence in the decision-making process has remained weak.

In principle, the constitution protects women from sex discrimination and exploitation. In practice, however, constitutional provisions lack enforcement mechanisms. Trafficking of girls and domestic violence are endemic and are recognized in Nepal as a social evil. Several pieces of legislation have been passed to combat trafficking, such as the New Muluki Ain (1963), the Human Trafficking Control Act (1987), and the Special Provisions of Human Trafficking Act (1996). These laws have not been strong enough to deter perpetrators. In fact, even village elites are involved in such trafficking, and because the trafficked girls are illiterate and poor they are unlikely to be able to fight against trafficking in a court of law.²⁴

Ironically, the most ardent supporters of women's empowerment have been the Maoist rebels, a rebel insurgency group that initiated a "People's War." This movement has attracted many women who have suffered under the patriarchal structure of their society and previously felt powerless and excluded from the political sphere. According to one observer, "the fight for women's equality and liberation is woven into the very fabric of this People's War."²⁵ In areas where the Maoist movement has dominated the local government, women are more equal to men, who also share traditional women's work such as collecting water, cleaning, and washing clothes. The Maoists encourage women and girl children to learn to read and write. Hence, women feel included and respected.²⁶

According to sympathizers with the rebel cause, the Maoists are fighting against all forms of oppression, including subjugation of women. One of their demands is, in fact, that "patriarchal exploitation and discrimination against women should be stopped. Daughters should be allowed access to parental property."²⁷ The Maoists have banned alcohol in many villages of Nepal to protect women from intoxicated men. The leader of the Maoist All Nepal Women's Association, Kalpana Dhamala, says, "The free use of alcohol has done a great injustice to women, as drunk husbands go wild and attack their wives."²⁸ In a rural village of Kavre district, a woman mentioned, "the Maoists have been very kind to us by enabling our husbands to stop drinking and gambling."²⁹

Critics of the Maoist rebels point out that women have suffered due to armed conflict and forcible

recruitment into the People's War. For instance, women have become helpless when their male family members have been killed during the armed conflict or they themselves have been displaced by the war.³⁰

Although the empowerment mechanism in Nepal has been developed, improvement is needed in different sectors. The government, NGOs, and other organizations have established wings to focus on women's empowerment, but real action at the grassroots level is still needed. Policies on women's empowerment

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and development are still dominated by elite theory and remain too vague to address the real problems of inequality. Despite all the efforts made by different actors, there has not been a real improvement in the socio-economic status of women at the grassroots

level. Problems like domestic violence, trafficking of girls, and low access to education, economic resources, and opportunities are still prevalent.

The government, non-governmental organizations, and international agencies need to focus more broadly on strategies for empowering women in Nepal. First, there must be better networking and coordination among women's wings established in different sectors in order to achieve an integrated effort for women's empowerment. Second, gender-mainstreaming activities should be properly integrated at the local government level in order to encourage the political empowerment of women. Third, institutions advocating empowerment activities should be locally based and focus on empowering women and at the same time raising men's awareness. Fourth, women's literacy and vocational education should be emphasized to provide opportunities for local employment. And lastly, laws and regulations protecting women's rights should be effectively implemented and available to all classes of society rather than only to the wealthy. ■

NOTES

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- 2 Asian Development Bank, *Country Briefing Paper: Women in Nepal*, 1999, <http://www.adb.org/Documents/Books/Country_Briefing_Papers/Women_in_Nepal>.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 The maternal mortality rate is estimated to be 539 per 100,000 live births. United Nations Development Programme, *Nepal Human Development Report 2001* (Kathmandu: UNDP, 2001).
- 5 GDI is prepared by using gender equal distributions of indices of life expectancy, educational attainment, and income.
- 6 NESAC, *Nepal Human Development Report 1998*.
- 7 GEM measures the degree of participation by men and women in economic, political, and professional spheres.
- 8 Asian Development Bank, *Country Briefing Paper: Women in Nepal*.
- 9 Kate Young puts emphasis on collective action and change in power dynamics of men and women. Both men and women should be changed to ensure a harmonious society in the future. Kate Young, *Planning Development with Women: Making a World of Difference* (London: Macmillan, 1993), 157-163.
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- 11 Meena Acharya and Pushpa Acharya, *Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women, A Status Report* (Kathmandu: UNFPA, 1997), 38.
- 12 Meena Acharya, "Women and Economy: The Key Issues," in Laxmi Keshari Manandhar and Krishna Bhattachan, eds., *Gender and Democracy in Nepal* (Nepal, 2001).
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- 28 "Here Come the Maoist Women," *The Economist* (August 25, 2001): 36.
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