Women and their participation: the Nepalese context

“I solemnly refuse to be caged like a pigeon

Women of new Nepal are not for only kitchen”

I am writing this essay sitting in Nepal, observing and experiencing the transition it is currently going through. Even though the People’s Movement of 2006 brought massive changes in the country, the initially pledged empowerment and secured participation of women at all levels in each sector of the society is far from being fully addressed. Majority of people in Nepal still hold a number of misconceptions about women’s potential, be it in economical, political, or social areas. Their belief and actions try to place women as weaker sex meant to work at home, not realizing that they are equally capable of being a doctor, a lawyer, a teacher, a businesswoman, a politician or an accountant just like men are. This can be exemplified by offensive sayings such as “son brightens the world and daughter brightens the kitchen”, which are quite commonly used in the country.

Participation of women, most importantly a meaningful one, is taken as a prerequisite of their empowerment and has been a matter of constant global concern and debate for decades. In Nepal, when one talks about empowering women, the first things that come to mind are seminars, workshops and conferences held every year, mostly in posh hotels. However, the real impact of these events in actually strengthening women’s decision-making power is highly questionable. What empowering women actually means, especially in the case of developing countries like Nepal, is making them capable of handling their own issues. It is the ability to realize that they are entitled to and have equal rights to an opinion, the desire and power to voice that opinion, and finally generate action for its fulfillment.

Where we are now and what are the problems

The feeling of authority is multifaceted. To start off the journey towards empowerment, a woman has to gain a certain degree of authority in the economic, socio-political, educational and other aspects governing her life. Interestingly, all of these forms of authority, along with empowerment and ultimately women’s participation are interconnected. Lets first discuss where we are in these areas.

i. Political arena: Nepal has taken significant strides in the participation of women in political issues. Nepalese women who were not aware of the concept of voting in the past were seen flocking to cast their votes in the recent national election held in 2008. Out of the total voters, 49.6% were women (UNMIN, 2008). Similarly, our present Constituent Assembly (CA) has a considerably large proportion of women representatives in comparison to other countries. However, despite their presence, the issues pertaining to women are far from being prioritized by the CA. They are hardly seen voicing their own opinion on any issue, let alone those concerning women’s rights, their health and their empowerment. This leads to the realization that representation for the sake of reaching a certain numerical target is not enough. Analyzing further, it is important to note that the reason we have many women CA members is actually because each political party had to select certain number of female candidates who were then nominated as party’s representative in the CA.
Coinciding is the fact that among the total candidates actually running for election, only about 9% were women (UNMIN, 2008). This further underscores the need for meaningful participation.

**ii. Employment:** Though the Government of Nepal has committed to reserve 33% of all positions in all bodies owned by the state for women, they occupy less than 1% of the high-level, decision-making positions (FWEAN, n.d.). At present, almost all job vacancies mention ‘women are strongly encouraged to apply’. However, women applicants represent a very small number as meeting the qualifications required is often difficult. Discrimination in pay-scale between men and women, both in agricultural and non-agricultural sectors also prevail (Table1). On the other hand, recruiting unqualified individuals in the name of securing participation could compromise the work efficiency and effectiveness of the organization. This would make women’s participation a liability rather than a necessity.

**iii. Education:** The literacy rate among Nepalese females is just 42.8% compared to 65.5% among males (CBS, 2001). Families prefer sending sons to schools rather than daughters. She is expected to remain at home, look after her siblings and help her mother with all household chores. This is linked to Nepali cultural expectations that girls will leave once married, whereas sons will look after the parents. It is for this reason that sons are valued more than daughters. Moreover, even if girls are enrolled, they rarely get to attend the classes regularly. To make things worse, the probability of girls dropping out of school increases as they get older, mostly due to lack of proper toilets and sanitation facilities in schools, which becomes a significant problem during their menstrual period (Water Aid, 2009). The lack of education or regular absence limits their opportunities for holding jobs and for economic enrichment. A direct consequence of being deprived of education is the lack of knowledge about their rights and their diminished voice to demand for it. Thus continues the vicious cycle of ignorance and oppression.

**iv. Religion:** Incorrect interpretation about religion passed down through generations creates hurdles in enhancing women’s participation and empowerment. Although Hinduism, a religion followed by 80.6% Nepalese (CBS, 2001) sees men and women as complementing halves that are equal in strength, men throughout the centuries have bended the ways and designated themselves as the superior gender. This belief is reinforced so frequently that today, in Nepal, many women still think of their husbands as their ‘God’, one who should be worshipped and whose orders should be followed without questions making servility like a natural phenomenon.

**v. Media:** Media exposure has become a double-edged knife for women’s participation in Nepal. On one hand, it has led to broadened knowledge about achievements made by women and awareness regarding their rights. However, on the other hand, women, regardless of whether they live in cities or rural villages are seen idealizing female characters of various soap operas who symbolize stereotypical female roles limited to looking pretty, wearing expensive clothes, doing household chores and sacrificing everything for the happiness of her family. There are very few soap operas which have female characters as working professionals or practicing political, economic or social power. Portraying a woman’s crusade to establish herself in her work field or her contribution to society in other forms is also limited.
vi. Biased traditions: As previously mentioned, the tradition of girls going away to their husband’s house upon marriage has lessened their status even within their own family. To add to this plight, the custom of giving dowry to daughters during their wedding has made them a huge financial burden and liability for the parents, further decreasing their importance and status in the family. Even a highly educated daughter is found to have less decision-making power than a less educated son and the differences are even wider when compared between husband and wife. This is often because girls get married at a very young age and are not given the opportunity or respect to voice their opinions in their new family.

vii. Discrimination on economic value: Being primarily an agricultural country, women and men in Nepal earn their living by working in the fields. However, along with working outside, women have the additional burden of household chores and taking care of the family. More importantly, as this is not calculated in economic terms, it has strengthened the misconception that men are the bread-winners and thus their dominance in making decisions for the entire family is justified, be it about which crop to cultivate in which season, or how many children women are supposed to bear and when. Thus, although the percentage of females in the total economically active population is an increasing trend, it is far from reaching even fifty percent (Table 1)

Table 1. Economic indicators of women in Nepal

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicators</th>
<th>Census years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Economically active population (%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>46.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>83.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of female in total economically active population</td>
<td>34.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of female engaged in agriculture</td>
<td>63.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of female engaged in non-agriculture</td>
<td>14.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female / Male wage ratio</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-agriculture</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: (1) Population Census, 2001; (2) Population Monograph, CBS 1995.

viii. Caste system: Despite being legally abolished, the caste-system is still socially prevalent as are the job divisions associated to it. Women and girls of the so called ‘upper caste’ are not accepted working professionally as seamstresses, cobblers, potters or butchers. So subtle is the impact that when modern women go for pedicures, some tend to ask for the caste of the tender and if belonging to Brahmin caste, the customer give them ‘dhog’ (a gesture where one touches another and touch their own forehead with the same hand as a sign of respect) before letting them touch their feet.

ix. Risk of sexual and other forms of harassment: Stories of Nepalese women migrating abroad to work severely abused has become routine. Similarly, women
working in hotels, massage parlors and restaurants in cities are subjugated to constant threats from their employers and customers. Such incidences also de-motivate Nepalese women to work outside their homes.

**What are the possible solutions**

Lets start talking about solutions with a contextual example. Monsoons in Nepal create conditions wherein the roads will be filled with a number of pot holes every year making the spots accident-prone. This problem can have numerous solutions like the local people filling in the hole, repairing it to ensuring sustainability etc. However, implementing just one of them would just address a part of the problem. Similar is the case with securing women’s participation. Rather than ‘one-problem-one-solution strategy’, we need to have comprehensive and sustainable interventions that can address this problem in totality. Some of them are mentioned below-

i. *Increased access to and utilization of education and services*- Increasing the number of schools and colleges along with removing the barriers of its utilization by girls and women is necessary. So, making academic institutions more girl students-friendly by providing them scholarships, proper uniforms, toilets, and other facilities is important. Promoting female teachers as role models could help in encouraging and empowering women to participate.

ii. *Alternatives*: The percentage of female engaged in occupations other than agriculture is in an increasing trend in the country (Table 1). Maximum of the ‘tempos’, (a 12-seater electric vehicle used as public transport) in Nepal have women drivers. The number of self-employed women in the country is also in the rise (FWEAN, n.d.). Opportunities of capacity building and provision of trainings of alternative employment could make the situation better by supporting women’s participation.

iii. *Positive deviance*: Influence has induced major reforms in our country’s socio-political and economic system to ensure women’s participation. For example, a large number of women in former Maoist combatants induced inclusion of female in the defense positions of Nepal Army, which formerly had no policy to recruit women in such posts. Use of such techniques could generate positive deviance towards being empowered.

iv. *Unity and comprehensiveness*: Being united helps in organizing a single voice. Numerous women’s group, mother’s group and professionally women’s group exist throughout Nepal wherein women perform various tasks together. For example, Rakshya Nepal is an NGO which in one hand runs as a rehabilitation center for trafficked and sexually abused women and girls and on the other hand operates a financial co-operative which financially supports women and men through micro-credit facilities. This way, they have been using the money to enhance participation of women in trainings and income generating activities. They have also provided a platform where community mobilizers can discuss emerging issues ranging from women rights to HIV and advocate to secure the rights of women in Nepal.

1 Personal interview with Ms. Urmila Thapalia, the President of Rakshyashree Saving and Credit cooperative Limited, Nepal
Platforms like these provide economic and socio-political security to women, along with a platform to discuss different agendas. This will help them to identify their real need and seek solutions.

v. Co-ordination amongst women: There is a saying in Nepali that ‘the plight of a woman is understood best by another woman’. Subsequently, having a committed panel of women in authority position will ensure better response to issues of the others bringing up the issue. Even if the concerned position is not taken up by women, they can work together to influence the person in power to make programs, formulate laws and policies that are pro-women and cater to their special economical and socio-political needs.

vi. Awareness and skill-building together: Trainings for alternative employment opportunities such as sewing, driving etc. would make better use of resources and have better impact on empowering women. More importantly, we need sustainable programs which deal with this issue in a comprehensive manner. Incorporating awareness-raising session or skill-building workshops along with alternate means of generating livelihood would be an effective means to achieve this end because only when improvement in each political, economical, educational and social aspect is underway can ‘women empowerment’ actually be possible.

vii. Pro-women economic policy through involvement: Having a pro-women economic policy is undoubtedly a pre-requisite to strengthening economic independence in women. Participation of women in the process of policy formation, with guidance from experts could ensure this. In reality, policies are drafted by committees of men, with little consultation of women at the community, district, regional or national level, and presented in front of Parliamentarians, who again are mostly men. As a result, the policies neither succeed in addressing the real need of women, nor do women feel a sense of ownership towards it. Therefore, women should participate in each and every step of policy formulation and implementation, not only being limited to raising hand for or against passing of a certain bill or policy.

viii. Strong advocacy: It is due to strong advocacy initiatives on the part of female human rights activists and lawyers in Nepal that the National Civil Code got amended eleven times to ensure women’s rights. Thanks to the strong and unanimous voice of women activists and civil society, women in Nepal now have secured property rights, the right to opt for abortion and even file a case against marital rape (Pandey, n.d.). However, the challenge now is to unify these voices so that women’s issues are not neglected by the majority. Initiatives of women CA members to create a unanimous commitment to ensure rights and participation of women are underway. Awareness rising sessions on HIV and AIDS and women in Nepal conducted among women CA members is an example of such initiatives².

ix. Secure workplace and other facilities: Strong policies against workplace harassment, both within and outside the country and provision of facilities such as maternity leave, child-care center in or nearby the office could help to reduce the barriers prohibiting women’s economic activities.

---
x. Awareness raising sessions: Conducting awareness raising campaigns throughout the country addressing different barriers of women’s participation could help in curbing this problem. It could be done-

a. By using celebrities

i. targeting parents to motivate them to send their daughters to school and end all forms of discrimination against them

ii. at workplace to make the environment more secure and women-friendly

iii. targeting women to motivate them to be strong, empowered and participative in all sectors of the society

b. By using religious leaders so that they incorporate gender balance in speeches they deliver every morning in television and in other occasions

xi. Felicitating the effort: Awards could be given to media personnel who showcase and promote women’s participation in different sectors of the society. Similarly, there are awards in Nepal such as ‘The VOW Top 10 College Women Competition’ for recognizing girls and women who have contributed for the betterment of society and have a vision or for their excellence in education or work, or for any unique achievement could influence a wider population of women to aspire to do something new. Recognition of the struggle and achievement of women from different walks of life could inspire other women in their own journey towards empowerment and participation.

ix. Youth as change-makers: With a strong zeal to create change, involvement of young people in raising awareness amongst men and women about the gender issues, legal status and importance of their participation is crucial. Going back to the example of Rakshya Nepal, youth volunteers working in different fields have been supporting the NGO by working voluntarily, facilitating awareness raising sessions, educating the girls and women and arranging for training opportunities of alternate methods of livelihood. Similarly, there are other NGOs such as Volunteers Initiative Nepal, which provide opportunities to youths from Nepal and beyond to empower women from marginalized communities by providing them education, trainings and micro-credit facilities to promote gender equality, human rights and economic enrichment (VIN, n.d.).

Lastly
The bells of ‘New Nepal’ are ringing in the vicinity. However, all of us need to realize that that will not be possible until women’s participation is secured at all levels in all sectors of the country. Learning from past mistakes of discrimination against women and adopting success stories of women empowerment from around the globe with youth at the fore-front of the crusade could bring about this most-hyped transformation.

3 Personal communication with Ms. Urmila Thapalia, the President of Rakshyashree Saving and Credit cooperative Limited, Nepal
Bibliography


