

PERCEPTIONS AND PRACTICES OF SOCIETY TOWARDS SINGLE WOMEN IN THE CONTEXT OF NEPAL

Mina Uprety *
Sikshya Adhikary *

The purpose of this paper is to highlight on the perceptions and practices of society towards single women, specifically the widows, in the context of Nepal. The focus is on issues of gender relations and the status of widow women. The arguments are based on the review of literature and the author's own observation of social practices towards women and widow women. The discussion starts by defining the concept of women and single women and proceeds through the discussion of their status in relation to men as they are prescribed by codes of conduct of society.

Concept of Women and Single Women

The binary opposition between men and women construct two antithetical sets of characters that position men as superior and women as inferior. This scheme includes dichotomies between rational/emotional, assertive/passive, strong/weak, or public/private. These are strategic oppositions, which place men in the superior position of a hierarchy and women in the inferior position, as the second sex (Best and Kellner, 1991). Wherever women are subordinate, and they have been subordinated almost always and everywhere, they seem to have recognized and protested that situation in some form (Lerner, 1993). There is very little consent to be found, for example, in the fact that Flaubert's encounter with an Egyptian courtesan produced a widely influential model of the oriental women: she never spoke of herself, she never represented her emotions, presence,

* Ms. Meena Uprety teaches Sociology at Trichandra Multiple Campus, Tribhuvan University. Ms. Sikshya Adhikary is a freelance consultant.

or history (Said, 2001). Various societies (including Nepalese society) in recent days have, however, initiated to show appropriate concern and respect for women, allowing them sizeable freedom and dignity in various dealings and existence. Until now, masculine sentiments have not entirely developed a tolerable culture. They still have a construct or a deep feeling to consider and understand women as the subject to be treated with extreme kindness and deliberation (Women are not considered more than the source of continuing men's lineage). It is still persistent in many places, both in policies and practices, that women as such cannot fully exercise human as well as constitutional rights. They are (were) naturally low-grade to men and as a result have to be for all times subordinated and oppressed.

Single women can be referred to those women who abandoned their husbands, who are divorced with their spouses, whose husbands are dead and those who are unmarried till the age of 35. Understanding for single women differs from differences of nature and forms of single women. Unmarried, divorced, separate and widow are the various forms of single women and all these forms are defined in different ways. Literally, unmarried single women are defined as those who are not married or have an unmarried status. Divorcee single women are those who have legal ending of a marriage. Similarly, separate single women are those who stop living together as a couple. Besides this, widow (a category which is of more focus in this paper) is simply defined as a woman whose husband has died and who has not married again.

Widow is a harsh and hurtful word. It is derived from the *Sanskrit* and it means "empty." Women for Human Rights (WHR) thus passed a national declaration to use the word "Single Women" replacing the terminology "Widows" to rephrase this "state of being single" as a natural phenomenon. The change in terminology has made many effects, particularly, to the rights of widows. However, over the time, the definition of single women has undergone change to include divorcees, unmarried women over 35 and other single women. In spite of the several social reforms and legal enactments, the widows (especially youth widows other than elderly widows) continue to suffer the physical, mental, cultural and other social discriminations and many other social malaises.

Whatever may be the reason for remaining single, it is a fact that human society since very long has remained prejudiced and narrow-minded towards them. It is very easy for people to blame the women for remaining single, whatever may be its reasons and realities. If we look into the lives of these women, it is not easy for them to stay single in a strict and rigid patriarchal society like Nepal. They have to bear horrific suffering in every moment of living a single life.

The rising number of single women in recent time has contributed to misrepresent the existing order of patriarchal arrangements. The number of unmarried single women has been increasing day by day. It has been so because they are interested to complete their creative and productive education, to grab opportunities of better life provided by that education and want to have an independent and career-oriented existence. Similarly, divorce rate has become high as a result of pressure or mental strain inflicted by marriage, love and artificial love marriage, lack of common understanding among the spouses, vindictive dowry system and various conservative and profitable or commercial marriage practices. Increasing ratio of widows is considerably high and outstanding as a result of child marriage practices, restriction of remarriage, death of husband in accidents, insurgencies or other unnatural contexts and situations.

Living life as a daughter, a wife, a mother and as a single woman leads to innumerable challenges, confrontations and disturbances. Though the global scenario of women seems to be improving, the societal manifestation of male predominance is so deep-rooted and deep-seated that the impoverishing circumstances of a woman, especially widow needs to be underlined.

Marriage, Husband and Widow

Marriage is a remarkably imperative occasion in the existence of women. A compromise marriage (related person) is a greeting and salutation of security for women. A marriage by pressure (such as traditional and religiously-oriented) is not good for women. Marriage, in course of time, is followed by motherhood, and its reappearance makes the women occasionally powerless, incapable and completely dependent on her

husband. The husband becomes the leading power and the wife's circumstance is one of ethical subordination (Uprety, 2008). In the *Vedic* society, we find that the wife was treated with utmost courtesy and regards. It was well recognized that the wife was the ornament of the house (Altekar, 1959). The average Hindu wife who is ideally compared with *Savitri* is not imagined to be separated from her husband because of the deep-rooted belief that she would neither have desire, pleasure, prosperity nor heaven once separated (*ibid*). The majority of Nepali women (both educated and non-educated) are strongly attached as the housewife and helper of the husband rather than his equal partner. The wife on her part performs traditionally identical duties, compulsions and responsibilities. She is obliged to be appropriated and well mannered to her husband in her wedding promise and move ahead with her life of a just right *pativarata*.

As a practice in Nepal, marriage is regarded in the form of a spiritual and social obligation and commitment between both men and women relation. It is also a common understanding of people in our society that neither men nor women can have a happy and successful life in this world and also in heaven if they have not entered into marital life. Our social values have provided an orientation that women have to feel privileged to be with husbands in the family, and be content with happiness gained through this relation by their spouse. The theories of family and marriage institution have established an ideology that a woman is the equal partner of the male for the maintenance of the family and other dealings. However, what is in practice is that she holds an inferior status within these social units.

Death is inevitable. But, the bereavement due to loss of husband creates a severe problem in the role adjustment for a woman. The oppressive social structures founded on patriarchal construction make widowhood personally problematic for individual widows. Social researchers, social workers, social reformers and planners have ignored the problem of widowhood. In a male-dominated society, women are most unfortunately viewed as household workers and child bearers. It is only natural that in such an atmosphere, women are neither properly educated nor informed of their rights and legal procedures. This takes a worst turn after a woman is widowed.

The sudden and abrupt loss of marital status happens due to death of the husband. The loss of the husband is not the only suffering that a widow, has to encounter. When a woman becomes a widow she is further required to obey very stern and rigid rules and regulations to curb many areas of her freedom. These types of normative requirements prescribed for widows differ as per different types of castes, ethnic and religious communities. However, economic dependence is the major problem that outweighs other types of restrictions to keep them in marginal social position. Among Hindu, widows are not allowed even to wear the red color, a color regarded as a symbol of luck to use in religious ceremonies. As widows are considered inauspicious, they are not supposed to participate in religious and other cultural ceremonies like worship of gods and goddesses, marriage of their own children, etc. Most widows are ignorant of any legal rights they may have about compensation or inheritance. It is pity that widows lack self-confidence and are depressed, discriminated, afraid and immobilized in all their lives only because they are women. Those are facts for all the women, even those who are educated (WHR, 2006).

After the death of the husband, the change that takes places in a women's life confers them a different type of status from wifehood to widowhood. The life of widows is one of darkness. Social norms restrict their mobility, remarriage, employment, interest, happiness, ownership and other kinds of social and cultural relationships. In case a widow heads a household, her position sometimes becomes much worse both socially and economically. Various less-developed societies are unsuccessful to ensure proper rights of the women, so are suffered the widow.

Widowhood and Gender Relation

In Nepal, similar to many other countries, social issues concerning women, gender relations and gender associations have received little level of attention from the scholars. However, it has gradually been realized that there are inequalities, discriminations, subordinations and inhuman treatments in gender relations leading to many types of suffering for women.

The traditional patriarchal thought requires a wife to be propitious for her husband. The long-established religious principles (*Dharma Shastras*) prescribed in *Manu-Smriti* has mentioned that among Hindus the women are accountable for ensuring the social, physical and spiritual happiness of males, especially in their role as wives. They can satisfy this duty through dedicating themselves to the life of their husbands. Her devotion and fidelity to her husband is thought important to prolong his life too. At the same time, she is also regarded as a cause to bring him death and misfortunes. His death further afflicts many other types of problems in her life including change of her socio-cultural identity and loss of freedom in many issues. In other words, a husband's death results in a number of social and cultural problems in the life of his widow. She retains only a limited or restricted level of freedom to remarry, own property, and take advantage of social and economic opportunities provided for male by society.

In Nepal, the consequences of socio-political conflicts of the last fifteen years (those related to Maoist insurgency and various social movements) left tens of thousands of women to become widow without their own involvement in these events. However, the conventional belief of society takes this type of their suffering also as a product of their sins committed in the past probably in previous life. How far this belief matches with the hard fact of society is a question which requires answers through empirical studies and investigations (Uprety, 2008).

The condition of widows vastly differs in different groups of people distributed in different areas. Despite these variations, they all have one feature in common that as widow they have to bear a number of sufferings. Widowhood and related burden of restrictive rules and regulations separate and marginalize them from their community, family and the circle of relatives. Being a widow is a dishonor. It gives the impression that she has made many mistakes in life by being a woman and a wife. People tend to evaluate them unsympathetically to tag bad symbols. This makes the widows very embarrassed to open their identity as a widow in the public.

The widow has to lead a life of self-mortification. Sometimes her head is shaved. Married women whose husbands are alive avoid any

cultural links with the widows. They are regarded as the symbol of evil (*Alakkshini*). Widowhood is a curse on women.

The widowhood and evils associated with it has roots to pre-*Vedic* era. According to an article, "Victim of Discrimination" written by Dr. Ginny Srivastav, Professor of Delhi University, the traditional word for widow is a symbolic identity for a woman, whose husband is dead. The term "*Vidawa*" or "widow" is very old and can be traced to *Vedic* scriptures or even beyond to Indo-European origin. Despite the social transformations caused by scientific advancement over the past 200 years leading to change in human outlook, there has hardly been any change in people's attitude towards widows.

It is true that there is always role differentiation and a division of labor at least according to age and sex. Adults and children, males and females are always assigned with different tasks. However, some studies (e.g., Duberman and Azumi 1975) have mentioned that in this division of labor Nepali women are among the most deprived groups on earth. Parents are legally obliged to support sons, not daughters. Only sons can inherit. The only compensating factor is that a wife is entitled to 50 percent of her husband's property. After a wife is widowed or deserted, her in-laws steal her share. One study has reported that more than 1.6 percent of the female populations in Nepal become already widowed by the age of 29 (Acharya, 1994). The risk of widowhood and related types of problems for the women tends to increase with increase in their age.

The patriarchal social values always make critiques and pose unseen restrictions to the young widows. All their activities are seriously watched with negative eyes. They are not supposed even to talk to other males in society. Together with the burdens, they have to bear the responsibility for the maintenance of their children which deprives of their freedom and orients them to think that they cannot have a better life even when they dare to remarry.

Hindu social structure is such that it makes majority of women dependent on male members of the family. As a result, when a woman becomes a widow, she becomes vulnerable. Lack of adequate expertise does not permit her to run any type of earning activity independently.

Such a situation leads them to rely on others even for the fulfillment of basic needs like food, shelter, health and others required for herself and her dependents. Alternatively, having no earning partner to support her in the domestic unit she has to bear a double burden of an earner and manager of the household unit. As a married daughter, she has no right to seek the help from her natal family.

It seems relevant in this context to have a look on the code of conduct prescribed for women and widow women on the basis of which they have to bear these sufferings. The Hindu philosophy regards widowhood as a social misfortune and imposes for the widows many conducts related to dress, color, behavior and others. Let us have a look at these social codes separately.

Dress and Color Code

Various set of laws or codes over the years have managed to achieve religious sanctions. The life of a woman undergoes total metamorphosis after she becomes a widow. Every aspect of her life undergoes changes. In Nepal or in any part of the world, there is no dress code for married men whose wives are alive or who are widowers. But at the same time, this is not very true for women. Dress and color code (rules, symbols, beliefs and other various social implications) changes for women with changes of her status from unmarried to married and from married to widowhood. The dress code and color code are different in different regions or groups in society. All secret and cloak-and-dagger codes and symbols of married-hood are to be shunned by the widow, proclaiming her status in the society. The dress code that the widows are enforced to accept aims to "de-sex" the widow and at times, they are even further humiliated by requiring to tonsure their heads. The dress code at widowhood is also introduced in a shocking manner by flouting the bangles with a pebble and wiping out the vermillion. Red color is the only disallowed thing, which makes them suffer as a widow all the time. Otherwise, they do not feel much different in their lives.

Behavior Code

According to the conservative philosophy, a widow is considered ill-

fated. She is habitually addressed in very insulting way or manner. Over and over again, she remains marginalized from actions and reflections of people on her so-called ill-treated status. A widow is supposed to have no relations with men outside her family. However, her position even within her family also remains subjugated regularly. She is prohibited from being present in any type of religious or social ceremonies. Her presence in such ceremonies are considered inauspicious. So, many widow women themselves do not desire to be involved in these social functions due to the apprehensions of being criticized by society.

Widows and Diverse Circumstances

Although widows look like powerless in the eyes of public, they are found to be involved in special works and services in order to manage and fulfill their every day expenses. Because of low level of their qualification and social linkages, these women are enforced to perform what they obtain at the first hand, and there is forever a terror in them of losing the jobs for subsistence generation. Nearly all widows care for the work they perform. The fear of any kind of sexual harassment that they may face in new social setting motivates them to stick in activities which they are performing rather than looking for alternative opportunities of emerging social environment. However, there are hopes for the improvement of such a social situation. If the widows are educated, and become qualified for profitable earning, they will have to face less economic problems. Once their economic problems are narrowed, it may help to increase their courage and confidence. The improvement of economic and education status also provides them strength to develop a feeling that it's not their sin or luck to be widow.

Conclusions

The death of husband makes a transition in the life of a woman from a wife to a widow. Whatever the cause of the husband's death is, in most cases, the wife has always been blamed for it. She is supposed to bring the ill-fortunes in the family. Her hard works, skills, dedication to the family is counted only as long as her husband is alive. The neglected and hated status of the widow is not the recent one. It is deep-rooted in the patriarchal Hindu structure. Though the widower can remarry, the

remarriage of a widow is considered very rare and uncommon. The society is very biased towards the widow's freedom and their life. Thus, it makes a widow feel inferior in all fields of society.

We feel that unawareness (not only of women, but of all circles) and illiteracy are the foremost fundamental issues of concern of single women, particularly widow. Though they are being victims of socio-cultural evils and customary practices, they are not aware of their rights and inferior status. Affected by the unfair type of patriarchal social philosophy and structure, they feel it as their fate and not the social prejudice. In contrast, the literate widows who are aware of their legal rights also think that these social evils cannot be neglected. The widows are shocked and shackled by socio-cultural and customary ideologies, relationships and practices. Unless they become literate and aware of their rights, it is difficult to change their suppressed status.

It is found that the widows in groups can appear much more confident to defy the evils and conservative practices of society. They can feel much secured in spaces, which are represented by themselves. In these spaces, they can share their inner feelings and find opportunities to understand each other. Absolutely, the women who are not organized are still mystified and baffled about their status. These women are much more vulnerable than the widows who are organized.

To date, all these ideologies and practices, separately and jointly, barricade women's common happiness and existence. Definitely, all sectors, aspects and levels the Nepalese society are dominated by the males. However, the circumstance is slowly but unquestionably changing with new options, opportunities and hope for women to emancipate themselves from patriarchal domination.

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