

Sociological Review of Women Participation in Social Movements of Nepal

¹*Radhika Devi Dahal*

¹Faculty member of Sociology, Tribhuvan University, Saraswati Multiple Campus, Nepal
[(Email: radhikadevidahal@gmail.com), ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-1746-9640>]

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Abstract

This article applies social structural approach to analyze women's involvement in social and political movements. It studies feminist movement of the world, and draws conclusion on the history and contemporary state of women as participants of movement in Nepal. It reviews some theoretical articles written by foreign scholars by giving equal emphasis to Nepali writers' articles to review the evolution of women participation in movements in Nepal. Throughout the paper, feminist movement in common and issues of women exclusion in particular are discussed. Women issues or the feminist movements are often taken as lightly, but the paper believes that women participation in social and political movements of Nepal is attached more to class component than the purely qualitative component like social exclusion. To be specific, middle-class women in Nepal are the pioneers of women's rights movement, and have contributed a lot to ensure women rights both in legal and political areas. Rights and privileges given to women both constitutionally and politico-culturally, basically from the 1990s in Nepal, and the benefit women have received in the fields of education, health, politics, employment, marriage, property, etc. are the results of middle-class women's actively leading role in political movements.

Key words: Middle-class, feminist movement, political movement, social change, sociological theory, women rights.

Introduction

Society is the field of power-exercise. Individuals, groups, communities, state agencies, or any other private and public companies, all are working to earn power. Thus, power seems to be the heart of human society. Power is exercised in all areas of social life. Institutions like family, marriage, health, education, politics, culture, entertainment, industry, business, law, religion, etc. consist of a kind of power-game between stakeholders. The dominant side of power-game always tries to be powerful while the powerless side also attempt to overthrow the power-structure and to defeat the dominant side. Members of a family, or an industry, political party, economic class, etc. engage in constant battle with

each other in order to be powerful. We can also see the battle between men and women involved in the same game, and patriarchy is seen as a result of that power-game (Tamang, 2000).

Crime and violence are also the result of power-exercise. Emergence of difference interest groups and their contradiction to each other are the by-products of more fundamental types of economic and political conflicts. Political inequalities give rise to different other economic and social inequalities, and more violent types of conflicts and revolts take place in society (Diani, 1992; Gusfield, 2007). The conflict between rich and poor or between owner and worker, or male and female is their interest to govern the other side. In other words, all types of inequalities are resulted by the unequal distribution of power to human beings in all societies. The disproportion of power provides disproportionate wealth as well.

Classical Marxism and neo-Marxism are two main variants of Marxism. Both of the variants try to analyze the inequality and exploitation in contemporary capitalist society. Classical Marxists believe that the state under the capitalist philosophy subjugates the lower-class people, while neo-Marxists argue that the bureaucratic structure of a capitalist government oppresses people. Structural Marxists further believe that the state plays a more dominant, semi-autonomous role in subjugating powerless classes (Sheley, 1985; Kelkar, 1985). Classical Marxists argue that capitalist societies are standardized networks of inequality and are dominated by capitalist class. Power is divided in a way that wealthy people are given more power and privileges and the working people are made powerless. The working-class people have only their labor to sell. The capitalist class uses state mechanism to earn more power. Neo-Marxists like Foucault and Habermas believe that state is exploitative in nature and is oppressive all the civilian. The state according to them is giving unnecessary trouble to people and as a result people have become mere objects (Foucault, 1999). The state further works to preserve the exploitative capitalist system and captivates the human subject. Unnecessary troubles given to the people by state is creating multiple illnesses. It is also said that the state makes policies not exactly to benefit people but to benefit itself. Thus, the state is constraining the individuals by setting so many limits to their life. It is dividing people as male versus female, healthy versus ill, good versus bad, or rational versus irrational. People belonging to one category is continuously involved in a competition to defeat the other.

Among so many tensions or conflicts in society, domestic violence is a common type and is affecting both the developing and developed countries. The frequency and form of violence differs, but the content is almost similar. It means that the domestic violence is making women the real victim all across the world. According to Center for Disease Control (CDC), domestic violence is a serious problem affecting more than 32 million Americans, or over 10% of the U.S. population. Domestic violence is the main hindrance to better socialization of children (Wallace, 2004). Children witness domestic violence, but can hardly oppose. Domestic violence brings negative thinking and aggressiveness among children. Cases of domestic violence are high in Nepal but are underreported. Key types of domestic violence against women are physical, sexual and economic. Women are taken as inferior, and are subject to abuse, torture and exclusion (Silver, 2007). Social norms and practices are maximizing the role of women in home and minimizing their role in the public.

The understanding of violence, because violence is a form of conflict, needs conflict theory to be discussed. In sociology, conflict theory is the widely applied theory to analyze or theorize social phenomena. Conflict theory has so many variants, but politically-driven and economically-driven

conflict are the major types of conflict theory. It is relevant to analyze the relation between haves and have not, capitalistic and workers, owners and workers, majority and minority, senior and junior, or between husband and wife, father and son, and one community and the other. We know that men and women are situated in all societies not only differently but also unequally. Women get very few material resources. Their social status is low, they are powerless, and very little opportunities are provided to them.

In order to understand, analyze and theorize women's status different movements came to take place particularly after the 1970s (Ritzer, 1996). Special approaches to gender inequality and oppression were initiated in the world level in different forums. The first conference on women issues held in Mexico City in 1975, followed by the second conference in Copenhagen in 1980, the third in Nairobi in 1985, and the fourth in Beijing in 1995. These conferences took place in American, European, African and Asian countries and were successful in bringing the network of gender and feminist scholars from across the world. Further, those conferences gave rise to different theoretical approaches and variants of feminism or feminist theories. "Women in development (WID)"; "gender and development (GAD)"; and "women and development (WAD)" were the major forms, which attempted to define women's status in society and politics. The WID came in 1970s was liberal version of feminism by nature, while the WAD came in 1970s as a Marxist type of feminism, and the GAD, which came in 1980s, was socialist type of feminist theory. The aim of all variants of feminism was to liberate women from their subordinated position, empower them and bring them to the field of employment, productivity and income (Shakya, 2010).

A potentially major truth of Nepali society is that women are the most excluded groups (Pradhan, 1994). They are excluded from earning and enjoying. If they want to earn or enjoy at their own, that is against the established norm, and women should be discouraged from earning and enjoying. This basic characteristic of society has created so many barriers to women. As a result, they are experiencing various forms, of physical, mental and sexual violence (Cameron, 1995). Women are facing so many risks because the legal and social support system to them is weak. Patriarchy is the major structural cause that has damaged female potential. As Tamang (2000) says, the Nepali state is legalizing patriarchy. Thus, the starting point of women's movement in Nepal should be noted as patriarchy.

Methodology

This article is written on the basis of primary data collected in Lalitpur district. The respondents were women, who had joined the People's Movement of Nepal in 2006. The women were asked why they had joined the movement. Besides, they were asked about the type of inequality they have faced in home or in workplace. Main aim of the researcher is to find whether the feminist movement of Nepal has connection with class component, thus, the respondents were clearly informed to talk about their class status. Exploring the economic class of an individual or a family is difficult indeed. The researcher had also felt difficulty in defining the class. But even after reading the book, *Suitably Modern: Making Middle-Class Culture in Kathmandu*, written by Mark Liechty (2008), the middle-ness of respondent was difficult to identify, because 'consumption', 'cinema', 'fashion', etc. – mentioned as constituents of middle-class by Liechty – were less relevant to the proposed respondents of this study. Thus, the right to determine one's economic class was given to respondents. But the coincidence was such that all the respondents claimed themselves as belonging to middle-class Brahmin and

Chhetri family. There were altogether 30 responding women, and all of them were Hindus. Interview was the only tool applied for data collection for this paper.

Result and Discussion

This part discusses the number and frequency of women's involvement in movements, their involvement in political party, and their strength in movement.

Strong voice for legal equality

All the respondents of this study claimed that law is fundamental to development and change in any society. The respondents said that society may take time to change, and the social norms and values are also difficult to change. But if a law is changed, it gives basic freedom to the concerned person. They viewed that changing the orientation of society by women without support from men is difficult, but if a change in law is made, society gradually follows the law, and at last, society becomes equal. They said that political movements have strength in changing the law, and if women join, their legal rights would also be guaranteed. If there is now law, no one can enjoy the rights, but if there is law, then anyone can in the future also can be benefitted by legal provision. The respondents also said that even if they were not taking advantage of the law, their offspring daughters would be able to get the rights, and they would enjoy more freedom than their mothers. They joined different movements in order to secure legal rights. Society is compelled to grant rights to anyone if legal provisions regarding right to equality and freedom are made.

Family support to participation in movement

All the interviewed women said that their families by and large were in favor of a democratic regime, which could guarantee rights to people of all walks of life. Since all the respondents were from middle-class background, the favor to a democratic regime by those middle-class families indicate that democracy is a choice of middle-class people. Moreover, their families had made no any interruption to any member of their families to join political campaigns and other movements led by any social organizations and political parties. All women said that other members of their families had also joined such movements before, during and after the democratic movement of Nepal in 2062/63 BS. Nepalese society is often blamed for not sending daughters or mothers to an open society like politics and political movements, but it is found that all the families of sample respondents in this research found highly encouraging their women members to join freedom and equality movements.

Class has connection with multiple political parties

It is said that the Nepali society is highly polarized in terms of class and politics. In other words, Marxist political parties like Communist Party of Nepal (CPN) United Marxist Leninist (UML), CPN Maoist (Maoist), Nepal Peasants and Worker's Party (NPWPP, National People's Front (NPP), etc. claim that mainly the lower-class people are their followers. While upper-class people are said as followers of liberal capitalist type of Nepali Congress Party (NC) and other traditional parties like Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP) and its other variants. It is said that the middle-class people in Nepal have no specific or rigid type of durable connection with any political party. But it is found that all the respondents, who belonged to the middle-class, were the rigid followers of UML, Maoist, NC and NPP. Out of the parties mentioned 8 women were from UML, 5 women were from NC, 16 were from Maoist, and 1 woman from NPP. It means that the middle-class in Nepal is connected to a wide variety

of political parties starting from a liberal capitalist type of NC and a seemingly more revolutionary type of Maoist. However, communist parties' strong connection with middle-class families in Nepal is seen in this paper.

Families consist of weakening level of gender stereotypes

Many Nepali scholars still follow the western blame of Nepali society being too much oppressive or stereotyped to women (Helel, 1993; Kausar, 1999). This research also attempted to explore whether the responding women had to face the common type of inequalities and oppression or cases of higher-level gender-based violence in their families. None of the respondents said that they had faced severe type of gender oppression in their families. They however said that their families still had still some faith some old-established traditional norms and values, which give more emphasis to male, but the families stopped giving continuity to more oppressive types of gendered norms. The joining of women in different movements before the People's Movement of 2062/63, in the Maoist-led People's War and in many other forums like meeting and conventions of their mother party were possible because of the support they had received from their families. Significant change in gendered norms has come to the family of respondents as most of the old-established norms about women like 'passive worker in home' were weakening in their families. According to respondents, only a few unequal types of gendered beliefs were existing in their families, and those remnants are not causing trouble to women participation in the public or movements.

Social change through movement

All respondents believed that people's movement is the major weapon to win the battle of women oppression. They said that any social or political movement has collective strength, which cannot be underestimated by any democratic or dictatorial power. If a woman demands a small thing, it becomes a big issue, but if women collectively make any demands, then those demands are more likely to be fulfilled. Thus, middle-class women had more trust on social movement and social change as much trust their families had on the movement. Major areas that need to be changed as they reported were special rights to be given to women for higher studies, for employment, for reproductive health, for leadership, for property, for citizenship, for marriage, etc. so that they could feel empowered (Pandey, 2014). Their preference to change in a wide variety of areas as mentioned indicates that the agenda of social change and the requirement of women to join mass movement has been the agenda of middle-class women.

Frequency of participation in movement in high

All the respondents had participated in movements for change on a frequent basis. Maximum number of movements that the respondent had participated was 36, while the minimum number of movements that the women had participated was 4. Most of the women belonging to Maoist party had joined maximum movements either led by their own party or led by joint efforts of other political parties or wings. Respondents belonging to NC had less participation in the movements compared to women from other political orientation. This data informs that the left-aligned women or communist ideology-driven women had more interest and commitment to join the movement for social and political change in Nepal.

Conclusion

Mass movements either led by women or by other groups have gone through several changes in their form, nature, aim and ideology. But these movements on the whole follow a common trend of aligning with several other individuals, groups or identities. Women participation in social movements of Nepal also seems that they have consulted with political parties, encouraged to join the movement by their families, prepared to play the effective role during the movement, and performed well as rebellions. This article makes a few conclusions. Firstly, women in Nepal have class-based involvement in social or political movement. Despite the fact women belonging to a Brahmin or a Chhetri caste is not considered much rebellious to join political campaigns or movements, this article finds that not only the role of a women of a middle-class identity but also the role of a women of an upper-caste identity is crucial in bringing social and political changes in Nepal.

Besides, women have an important role in raising movements to a height. It is found that the women interviewed during the research were found involved so many times in different mass-led movements over the years. It is also seen that the families in Nepal are changing a lot in terms of looking and behaving women. It means that the Nepalese families are becoming more gender-friendly, and have provided social and political opportunities and freedom to their female members to join the movements. Another interesting conclusion drawn from this paper is that the middle-class women have given more emphasis to law believing that social norms are difficult to change but if a law is made, the implementation to it can bring change in existing social norms and is obliged to be implemented in the formal constitutional democratic society.

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