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Gendered Consequences of Social Changes in Nepal: rich possibilities

Abstract

In this commentary article, we reflect on changing gender dynamics within a broader political-economic shift currently taking place in Nepal. We critique how Nepali women are stereotypically represented as uneducated or less educated vulnerable third-world women, who lack agency and are dependent on their male kin, in development and popular media discourses. Our key proposition is that the major political and economic changes of recent decades, beyond the obvious political changes witnessed in Nepal in 1950, 1990, or 2005, are having a significant impact on the lives of both women, and men, across different social classes, castes, regions, religions, and ethnic backgrounds. After outlining some of the stereotypical representations of Nepali women, followed by a brief discussion on the broader political-economic shifts, we conclude this paper by making four key propositions. These are: 1) Current political-economic shifts have profound gender consequences, which need to be examined and understood in scholarship; 2) Discussion on Nepali women’s position has been limited exclusively to being within the socio-cultural and religious domains, and particularly within Hindu patriarchy, which has overlooked the diversity of Nepali women; 3) Caring economy remain invisible; and, finally 4) As regards Nepali men, their changing roles, and ideas of masculinities, have been largely overlooked in any gender development policy debate. Overall, we argue that a more grounded, up-to-date, intersectional and critical understanding of dynamic gender relations within the shifting political economy is warranted, that neither romanticises nor pathologises Nepali women’s and men’s social positions.

Keywords: Gender, Social Change, Nepal, Representation, Hindu Patriarchy

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transformations in Nepal, the Himalayas and the South Asian region, especially the culture of migration; border crossing; gendered, classed and racialised mobility of labour; ill treatment; access to justice and citizenship in South Asia. He is the co-editor of HIMALAYA and an associate editor of South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies.
Introduction

We often encounter a contrasting representation of women’s position in Nepali society, in media, in development and government policy discourses. On the one hand Nepali women are represented as uneducated or less educated and economically vulnerable, who lack agency and are dependent on their male kin, which serves to reinforce their identity as ‘vulnerable women.’ On the other hand, we witness impressive statistics on notable improvements in Nepali women’s education, health, and in their participation in political and civic activities. The demand for women’s rights and justice is pervasive. How do we make sense of this apparent contradiction? This paper calls for an attention to the complex changing gender dynamics in a more holistic way, by taking a more grounded, and intersectional, approach. It calls for an up-to-date and critical analysis of gender relations, that neither romanticises nor pathologises women’s social position in Nepal.

The context in which Nepali men and women live their lives and secure their livelihoods is not their own making. It must be located with the context of broader political-economic changes. Based on our observation and ongoing engagement in the field of gender and development in contemporary Nepal,¹ we reflect on how gender dynamics have changed in tandem with the broader political-economic shifts in the country.

Unequal changes in Nepal

Nepal has experienced a profound and impressive change, from a deeply hierarchical social order, where gender differences were social norms, supported by a combination

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¹We use available secondary sources; research monographs, published papers and Doctoral Theses, national and international media headlines, and public policy debates that are relevant to this paper.
of religious ritual, legal provision, political economy, and state bureaucracy, to one where the call for gender equality and social inclusion is widespread. All of this has happened in just one generation. There is a general sense that incidents of gender-based violence, particularly violence against women and marginalised groups, are no longer hidden or normalised in society, but are increasingly reported and widely discussed by gender rights activists and the wider public, and in the popular media. Similarly, perceived gender-based discrimination in everyday life, including that regarding women’s citizenship and property inheritance rights, is frequently reported by media, widely researched and heavily debated in popular forum.

Available evidence clearly suggests that there is greater access to education and health services, a significant expansion of road networks, an opening of the countryside with widespread out-migration, and the increased availability and use of media, and of communication technology, in Nepal (Sharma 2021). In addition, there have been greater opportunities for women in politics, following the second multiparty democracy of 1990 (Lotter 2017; Yadav 2016; Manandhar et al 2001; Liechty 1996; Macfarlane 1994). Women are increasingly mobile, both within Nepal and abroad, with educational, professional and economic aspirations (Adhikari 2019; Grossman-Thompson et al 2017).

These, together with such forces as ideas of the modernity and materiality of development, and combined with shifts in the political economy, with the commodification of land, labour and social relations, have profoundly shaped the gender dynamics, with a concomitant significant impact on the lives of women and men (Sharma 2021; Campbell 2018; Sharma 2018; Pigg 1993). However, these social and political changes have been unevenly distributed, and have not occurred at the
same pace in all communities. Not everybody has benefitted from these changes in the same way across the country. Given ample evidence of how caste, class, ethnicity, religion and political patronage shape gender relations in Nepali society (Rai 2019; Lotter 2017; Tamang 2009; Tamang 2011), it is critical to pay attention to the heterogeneity in women’s and men’s experiences, and the layers of intersectional inequalities that prevail within that society.

**Essentialisation of the Nepali women**

Yet, as above described, Nepali women have been stereotypically represented in development discourses as uneducated and helpless women, who lack awareness, without agency and voice, and are subjugated by the dominant Hindu patriarchal social order at home, in the community and nationally (Rai 2019; Grossman-Thompson et al 2017; Fujikura 2001). Very often but subtly, the issue of gender inequality is seen as a residual problem of ‘Hindu religion’ and ‘Nepali culture’, to be dealt with by protecting women and through remedial provisions, rather than a dynamic relational and structural problem that demands addressing of the inequalities in economic and market structures. This is no denying that Nepali women and men, like women and men in the other parts of the world, are subjugated to patriarchy, and how gender, as a structure of differentiation and inequality, particularly disadvantages some women more than others, and also marginalised men. Yet, circulating a homogenised narrative of Nepali women’s oppression, in the national and international media, and in development discourses, on sexual and domestic violence, *chhaupadi*², dowry, accusations of witchcraft, trafficking of women and girls, and

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² A practice that is rooted in the belief that women and girls are polluted and impure during their menstruation period, and are to stay in a menstruation huts for a number of days. Although the practice is legally banned and has been criminalised with those forcing menstruation women to go into hut, various reports suggest that the practice continues in its various forms.
other practices, such as son preference, obscures the wider view of changing gender
dynamics in Nepal.

We argue that such stereotypical views are deeply ingrained, not only within the
social and political fabric of the society, but more importantly within the broader
western imagination, and representation of Nepal, and of Nepali women and men. The
region is seen as a static and sedentary society, untouched by forces of modernity
(Sharma 2021). On the one hand, Nepal is seen as a romantic mystical land, still
remaining pristine and unspoiled today by modernity and capitalism, as compared to
the west (Liechty 2018; Lindell 1997). On the other hand, development discourses,
influenced heavily by colonial ideas, present Nepal as a Third-World country, riddled
by disease and deprivation, where women are oppressed by the prevailing Hindu
patriarchal social order (Maxwell et al 2003). The western imagination of Nepali
society as exclusively sedentary, agrarian and immobile (Sharma 2008), rooted
particularly in unchanging cultural and religious traditions of Hindu norms, alongside
the colonial discourses of people in the third-world, in the hinterland, unaffected by
the forces of globalisation and western style modernity\(^3\), clearly overshadow the
current changing dynamic of the gendered lives of Nepali women and men. This is
despite significant statistical and ethnographic evidence of the diversity, for there are
notable socio-cultural shifts transforming women’s and men’s subjectivities and roles,
in the context of current dynamic social changes in Nepal.\(^4\)

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\(^3\) Personal comments, such as Nepal remaining hundred (s) of years behind in its material development and available physical comfort, compared to the developed West, can be heard very often in Nepal and also internationally. For example, see Bhandari (2019).

In line with the prevailing idea of women’s social position, findings of a study on gender relations and women accessing antenatal service in Nepal (Gurung et al 2015: 102) suggest.\(^5\)

… In Nepal, women are considered as second-class citizens in this patriarchal society. Thus, most of the families are headed by men and the women are treated as commodities or child producing machines. Women are affected disproportionately in different ways than men…

Similarly, the section of the ILO report (ILO 2017: 4) on women’s international migration echoes this stereotypical view, as it suggests:

…For women, gender-based violence and fleeing patriarchal norms are a key motive to migrate…

Here, Nepali women’s lives are portrayed as being so grim that they want to run away to foreign countries for freedom. In this version, women are trying to escape those patriarchal and socio-cultural traps. This narrative ignores the fact that women migrate because more opportunities are emerging for them in the wider global labour market and that they actively seek for those opportunities (Adhikari 2019).

Further, Bennett’s highly influential ethnography (Bennett 1983) represents high-caste women in Nepal as having a culturally prescribed role, which does not allow them to go beyond their social order. She observed women in her study who were deeply absorbed in performing and maintaining various symbolic roles as daughters, sisters, mothers and wives in their everyday lives. Stepping outside of such socio-culturally prescribed roles seemed almost impossible for them.

In a similar fashion, Nepali women in general are represented as those who have limited choices, or as not being allowed to make choices, in many important aspects in their lives, such as schooling, marriage, professional career or accessing healthcare.

Patriarchal social values, based on the Hindu religion and its caste system, have been

\(^5\) This information has been cited widely.
viewed as the main reason for all forms of discrimination against women. These appear in many forms: from women not having equal citizenship rights and property inheritance rights to women’s reproductive rights (Yami 2007; Laczo 2003; Thapaliya 2001).

*Women’s mobility under intense scrutiny by the State*

Women’s mobility has been a frequently discussed issue in Nepal. Women are viewed as a vulnerable group, unable to speak and to defend themselves from potential exploiters and abusers, while travelling solo, nationally and internationally, whether en-route or at their destinations. Another common justification is that vulnerable women end up being lured by people traffickers and migration brokers. So, their protection has been a prime responsibility for the family, as well as for the state.

In response to this, the Government of Nepal has made policy adjustments to protect women from being trafficked to exploitative international labour markets (Khadka 2021; Kaufman et al 2011; UNIFEM et al 2006; Pun-Magar 2004). As a result, in recent decades, the state has been patrolling women’s mobility outside of Nepal, particularly for those women going to the Gulf countries for domestic work. Scholars suggest this constitutes transference of patriarchy from the family to the community and state (Lotter 2017; Tamang 2000).

Women’s rights activists argue that the current Government emigration policy is gender-biased and paternalistic, and therefore discriminatory, and is enforced at emigration control in Kathmandu international airport and Nepal-India border crossings. For example, when women cross the Nepal-India border, they are rigorously scrutinised, and quite often harassed, by border security officers, which is
justified as their protecting women from being trafficked to India's sex market (Hausner et al. 2013; Kaufman et al. 2011). Social activists argue that, by virtue of being women, their basic human rights are compromised.

Nepali women’s migration to the Gulf countries has become a controversial issue for many years now. This is not because of the exploitation of the migrant workforce in destination countries, but because of the general perception of Nepali women being more vulnerable to sexual exploitation, therefore in need of more state protection than Nepali men. Like many other aspects of everyday life in Nepal, women’s increased mobility has been overly pathologised. The most recent parliamentary discussion on women under 40, who want to go abroad to work, as needing to have permission from their family members and local government authority, proves this point. This again has sparked human rights debates in the country (Khadka 2021). However, as indicated above, such policy moves can no longer be silenced or go unnoticed, and indeed are heavily contested by women’s rights activists (Budhathoki 2021).

**Creation and maintenance of women being a vulnerable group**

How do such stereotypical ideas about women and gender relations continue to be sustained, and indeed to thrive in Nepal? In the post-colonial world, these colonial ideas of ‘Third World women’ are sustained development discourses, fueled and fostered by the popular media and social activism. Women and children, particularly in a resource-poor country like Nepal, are categorised as a vulnerable group (Green 2013). International development and humanitarianism thrive on this idea. Nepal’s national development agendas are targeted to empower women ‘economically’, by mainstreaming them to the national economy, or inviting them to participate in labour market. It is also the prevailing mind-set of those engaged in advocacy work for
gender equality and women’s rights. A major goal of some international development, particularly in the case of those agencies working towards women’s empowerment, is of coming to rescue so-called ‘vulnerable women’ in Third-World countries (Hertzog 2011; Tamang 2000).

Interventions targeted to help the uneducated and the voiceless and dependent women range from improving female literacy and education and health service provision, to creating economic opportunities for them (Hertzog 2011; Shah 2004; Fujikura 2001). This idea is carefully crafted, and appears in academic and development writings, national policy strategies, and also in development practices. Tamang (2000) has argued that making women the target of development policy interventions ‘essentialises’ women. Critiques have also argued that, over the past few decades, the discourse on gender issues in general, and women’s issues in particular, has been mobilised and manipulated by various actors, quite often for political gain (Hertzog 2011; Lohani-Chase 2008). In order to sustain this idea of women needing protection, women are considered cheli-beti (literally meaning daughters and sisters), which means they are kin and much-loved family members but lack agency, and therefore need protection by men, usually their natal kin, if and when things go wrong in their husband’s family (Joshi 2001).

In a wider context, such ideas emerge from colonial discourse; when privileged white males have better access to resources, they hold more power to influence national and international development policy. Poor people, living in ‘poor countries’, are considered not only to be the disadvantaged in accessing resources, but also as having no agency, or as being unable to articulate their own needs. Therefore, people in stronger positions will speak on their behalf. Spivak (1994: 95) refers to this trend ‘as
white men saving brown women from brown men’, one which she implies is common in South Asian, and other low-income country contexts.6

Influenced primarily by colonial ideas, Government policy and programmes on women’s issues and development practices, particularly economic empowerment and female literacy programmes, promoting income generating activities, are based on the notion of uneducated vulnerable and voiceless women needing economic protection.

Yet, beyond these stereotypical representations lies Nepal’s dynamic political-economic process, which has had such a significant impact on the subjectivities and lives of women and men in contemporary Nepal.

**Gendered consequences of Nepal’s recent socio-political changes**

The profound socio-economic and political changes taking place in Nepali society have impacted gender relations significantly, in ways which have yet to be fully investigated and understood. Gender roles and subjectivities of Nepali women and men are transformed increasingly by broader socio-economic processes such as the incorporation of the economy and society into the commodification and global flow of labour and land, changes in the nature of the State, and the expansion of the public sphere amongst others.

In recent decades, there has been a diversification of rural livelihoods from agriculture-based to non-agricultural based ones, with sources of employment significantly impacting the gendered division of labour at household levels, as well as in the formal sector. Alongside a gradual weakening of traditional forms of bonded

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6 By white men she suggests those who are involved in international development projects, and suggesting that brown women are getting neglected by brown men in low-income countries, for only foreign men from affluent countries pay attention to women’s issues in low-income countries.
and caste-based occupation, and of gendered roles within the household, the mobility of labour, both within and outwith the country, and of both women and men, has become widespread, with significant gendered consequences for those who migrate, and also those who are left behind (Adhikari et al 2015; Sharma 2018).

If we take the example of women’s mobility to examine social changes in Nepal, a woman’s mobility outside of her community was not a common practice, until the mid-80s. It was not customary even for community nurses to travel to rural areas, or for any woman to travel to a foreign country for work (Adhikari 2019; Justice 1986). The practice has changed gradually since then, and is now widespread, with many young women working for NGOs, travelling regularly for work nationally and internationally. Women’s increased mobility in society has become a new norm now, and the international mobility of women is also a new, and socially accepted, phenomenon, and a trend, which has risen steadily since the early 1990s (Adhikari 2019; Grossman-Thompson et al 2017; Adhikari 2011; Bruslé 2010). Now, a new generation of Nepali women, some with professional and technical education, and others without those, migrate to foreign countries for work.7 When men (or women) move away from their traditional gendered roles and family responsibilities, this of course has a profound impact on those family members left behind (Adhikari et al 2015; Kaspar 2005).

Another area that has changed profoundly, and has gender consequences, is that of historically marginalised groups, who earlier saw themselves as subjects without rights. They have begun to assert themselves increasingly, as conscious political and

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7 In relation to women’s mobility, there is a need for an in-depth socio-economic class analysis, rather than just blaming any negative incidents as being yet again fuelled by the so-called ‘Hindu patriarchal social order,’ which is but another barrier to gender equality.
economic agents, and are seen by others as doing so too. This shifting consciousness has been very much driven by the discourses of ‘rights’, ‘empowerment,’ and ‘inclusion,’ as advocated by many of the Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), as well as during the Maoist insurgency (Lohani-Chase 2008; Leve 2007). With these new politicised identities, historically marginalised groups have also been demanding rights and entitlements from the state and other organisations.

Similarly, increasing numbers of women are formally involved in politics (Lotter 2017; Lohani-Chase 2008; Shah 2004; Pettigrew et al 2004). Provision of a 33% quota for women in the electoral system was introduced in the interim constitution in 2008, and consequently 32.8% women were elected in the Constituent Assembly election of that year (Lotter 2017; Renaissance Society Nepal 2009). Most recently, the constitution of Nepal, as well as the provisions of the Local Governance Act Article 24(5), makes it mandatory to ensure the participation of women in the planning and implementation of development programmes, and in process and outcome governance generally. Now, there is a significant proportion of elected women representatives from marginalised and disadvantaged communities in local government units. In national election in 2017, a total of 6,567 Dalit women were elected as ward members. The total number of women elected to local bodies is 14,353, accounting for almost 41% of women’s representation in local politics (Lotter 2017; Rai 2019).

Clearly there has been a significant increase in women’s participation in politics and community development activities (Yadav 2016; Shan 2004). Symbolically, the country has had its first female president, Bidya Devi Bhandari in October 2015, and
recently women have occupied other key positions in Nepali politics, such as Onsari Gharti Magar who was the first woman Speaker in Parliament (October 16th 2015 - January 19th 2018), and Sushila Karki who was the first woman Chief Justice (July 11th 2016 - June 6th 2017).

Young women and men’s socio-cultural worlds are transforming, and lives are profoundly shaped by the ideological and material impact of bikas (development), and the proliferation of modern goods and a new consumerism. Ahearn’s ethnography (2004) also suggests that women’s literacy and education have had a significant impact, not only on marriage practices, but also on gender ideology and social power in village communities in Nepal. Similarly, Shah’s ethnography (2004) clearly illustrates that women in the communities are actively involved in local development, trying to make lasting and positive impact on society, fighting for rights and justice.

Increased access to basic healthcare and other services has also transformed the lives of women and of men. Women’s reproductive health services in general have improved and strengthened, and a range of healthcare technologies have become more accessible, in both the government and the private sector, with marked improvements in health service coverage. Evidence suggests that the demand for contraceptive services, and for institutional childbirth, is increasing too. Official figures indicate that there has been significant success in reducing the maternal mortality rate in Nepal: from 770 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births in 1990 to 170 in 2011 (Dixit-Devkota et al 2013; Pandey et al 2013; KC et al 2012; Hussein et al 2011). The overall life expectancy has risen from 38.7 years in 1960 to 70.2 years in 2016 (Health Profile Nepal 2018).
National census data suggest that in the past six to seven decades, female literacy rates have increased from 0.7% (in 1952/53) to 57.5% in 2011 (Literacy Mapping Study Team 2013). Girls’ primary school enrollment has increased, and every year has seen an increased number of girls complete secondary school education, which then delays the age of marriage (MoHP et al 2017). Improved female literacy has been considered a sign of major progress and a positive change in Nepal.

Another important fact to consider is that Nepal has been experiencing very rapid demographic changes in the last few decades, as a result of its transition from a high-mortality, high-fertility society to a lower-mortality, lower-fertility society, within a relatively short span of time. The fertility rate has gone down from 6.68 in 1977 to 2.3 in 2016 (MoHP et al 2017). Most recent data put the neonatal mortality rate at 21 deaths per 1,000 live birth and under-five mortality rate at 39 deaths per 1,000 live births (MoHP et al 2017: p141). A USAID report puts infant mortality rate 255 per 1,000 live birth in 1952 (Skerry 1991: 370). Ideally, such rapid declines in fertility can propel a country’s economic growth through a process known as the ‘demographic dividend’, but Nepal has limited jobs and economic opportunities to take advantage of this potential (Sharma 2021). Again, changes in the population structure, with limited job opportunities, will have a significant impact on the gendered roles and subjectivities of women and men in Nepal.

**Women’s contributions to household economies and livelihoods continue to be undervalued**

Women in Nepal (and globally) are generally perceived as an economically unproductive group in society. In addition to the much-debated issue of women’s lack
of property inheritance rights in Nepal, they are placed in, and are represented to be in, economically weaker positions than the males in their families.

However, a clearly more realistic and credible scenario is that women always have been economically productive, in addition to undertaking household responsibilities. There is substantive evidence that women in rural and urban Nepal often work long hours in farms and factories, and increasingly now in the formal sector, while at the same time managing households and taking care of children, the sick, and the elderly (Maharjan et al 2017; Shah 2004). Furthermore, many oversee community affairs, and engage in diverse economic and social enterprises. Partly due to the overpowering image of Nepali women within religious and ritual practices, which relegate their position to be within the domestic and reproductive sphere, there has been very little acknowledgement of women’s actual contributions to household, local, and national, economies. It is not because they are economically unproductive, but stereotypical representation does not adequately consider household work as economically important work. This has created a mindset that obscures more realistic representations of women in the household, and also increasingly in the national economy. It is as if we cannot see beyond what has already been said and firmly set in our minds. Unfortunately, this mind-set has neither been challenged or questioned by research studies, nor critically and adequately analysed to understand the real economic, social, political and other contributions women make in society.

Women’s true contributions in Nepali society

We argue that as well as managing households and bringing up families, numerous study findings and reports are available, suggesting that increasingly women are running the majority of cottage industries and carpet factories (Tamang et al 2005).
For there is evidence that Nepali women are contributing significantly to these modern economies. On visiting the vegetable market, or any market environment in any small town across the country, where everyday essentials are bought and sold, there is an overwhelming presence of women. They manage most small businesses in their local communities. There are at least 50,000 Female Community Health Volunteers and over 100,000 Nurses and Midwives, serving local communities and playing a critical role in public health throughout Nepal.

Furthermore, women currently occupy various positions in the Nepal Army, Nepali Police Force and increasingly in Nepal Government positions. Women have become female trekking guides in the tourism industry, and can be seen driving passenger vehicles, in Kathmandu and other industrial towns in the Tarai. Women are now making a phenomenal contribution to the Nepali economy and to politics, and slowly influencing national policy (Yadav 2016; Lohani-Chase 2008). Studies have shown that Nepali women are not just economic dependents of their male kin, as suggested by dominant discourses, but also ‘heads of their households’ (Chapagain 2015; Kaspar 2005), and are becoming their ‘families’ breadwinners’ (UNIFEM et al 2006).

Additionally, in recent decades, an increasing number of Nepali women have been engaged in national as well as global economies, as many women out-migrate to cities in search of work, and indeed to different parts of the world. Women sending remittances from international sources make contributions to their household economy: yet another example of their active participation in the global labour market. A survey, that was conducted sixteen year ago by UNIFEM et al (2006), even almost a generation ago, revealed that most returned migrant women in the study sample, were without professional qualifications, and were in their 30s with
secondary school education, married with children, and usually had been abroad for between two and six years. They regularly sent money home while they were away. Some women started small businesses after they returned home, and others made multiple trips to multiple destinations, to support their household economy. This trend continues to date. Women’s increased education, involvement in the formal labour market, and their mobility, are key markers of their upward economic and social mobility, and indicative of women’s changing social position.

Because some of the household activities women perform are not calculated in straightforward monetary terms, they are often perceived as economically unproductive within the public policy sphere. So much so, that there are various misguided and patronising initiatives, led by powerful institutions, which are designed to bring women into the so-called ‘mainstream economy’. One can argue, if the overall aim of earning money and becoming wealthy is to improve our living standards, the contribution women and men make in the domestic sphere should have more value than money can ever purchase. Thus, the problem does not lie in a lack of women’s participation in the formal economy, but more importantly in the failure, by development economists, to value women’s work.

The ‘Women in Development’ perspective, which continues to produce dominant gender narratives, assumes that when women enter the formal labour market and have access to money, it will automatically change their social position.8 The assumption is that such economic engagement will improve women’s purchasing power. They will no longer need to be dependent on their male kin.

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8 **Women in Development (WID) perspective:** introduced in early 70s, the WID approach was to ensure, the integration of women into the workforce and increase their level of productivity in order to improve their lives.
While women’s economic independency and autonomy remain vital, there are counter arguments suggesting women’s involvement in a neo-liberal labour market will not only affect the care they were providing for their children, sick and elderly family members, but their work burden will increase, as they continue their conventional domestic roles, as well as working outside of their households. There is a double burden for women (Ehrenreich et al 2002). Additionally, with regards to women’s increased involvement in labour market, there is also the major issue of the wage difference between men and women in Nepal and also globally (Acharya 2001).

From an economic development perspective, there have been policies to bring women into the formal labour market, to improve women’s economic position for the country’s overall economic development and bring positive social change. Campaigns have emerged also to mobilise women for their positive roles in children’s education, nutrition, health, forestry and water and sanitation. In short, improving the status of women is often seen as the remedy for all socio-cultural and health challenges in Nepal.

Further, to balance this additional burden for women when they enter in formal economy, there is a need for men to share household responsibilities, something that has hardly been tackled by any state policy or development initiative. In order to obtain gender equality in a more meaningful and sustainable manner, we need to understand men’s views and work with them.

**Men’s perceptions and their changing gender roles in society have not been adequately understood**
We maintain it is crucial to consider both men and women’s perceptions, and their social and familial roles, in any gender debate. As discussed above, the broader social changes taking place in Nepal have also affected Nepali men’s lives, both in terms of their roles as men in the family, and their ideas of gender, which in turn impact gender relations, gender identity and the gendered lives of all.

Learning the views and perceptions of Nepali men, and finding out how their lives and ideas of gender are undergoing changes, following the phenomenal political and economic shifts taking place in the country, is critical. Yet, Nepali men, and their gendered roles, experiences, perceptions and views have rarely been an explicit focus of analysis or policy debate. Only a handful of studies focus on how Nepali men articulate their male roles and masculinities (Sharma 2018; Maycock 2017; Uprety 2011). Accordingly, we ask how do Nepali men articulate and appropriate ideas of gender hierarchies, masculinities, and of women in subordinate positions?

Nepal has gone through a major political economic transformation, from the relatively stable reproduction of social and economic relations, based on feudal and caste-based systems, to more fluid and open conditions, where the old socio-economic order is changing, if not collapsing, and giving way to a new order (Sharma 2018; Sharma 2021). Not only has there been a diversification of livelihoods, from land and agriculture-based to non-agricultural and non-land-based sources of employment, but the mobility of labour, within and outside the country, has also become widespread. The gradual weakening of traditional forms of attached and caste-based division of labour, as well as the profound ideological impact of bikas and modernity, has a direct impact on Nepali men’s gendered lives and thus also on Nepali women’s lives. Women’s increased involvement in non-traditional occupations, such as occupying
political and administrative positions as discussed above, and being the leaders of international migration (for example Nepali nurses leading their family’s migration to affluent countries, and husbands becoming their dependent family members) can certainly threaten men’s positions in the family and in society (Bagilhole 2002; Adhikari 2013).

The changes in the political economy have had an impact on the household and caring responsibilities and intergenerational contract within the family. With the increased mobility of men and women, both jointly and also separately, for work and education, men are also taking responsibility for the types of work that were historically reserved for women (Adhikari 2019). Additionally, given women’s increased involvement in the formal labour market, both nationally and internationally, many highly-educated professional men are compelled to take on so-called ‘women’s work’, providing care for their children and undertaking more domestic roles, such as cooking and cleaning (Adhikari 2013).

Men in Nepal are under intense pressure and face social and economic insecurity. They cannot find jobs, and possibly feel pressured by the images of educated, modern and empowered girls and women, increasingly joining paid employment, which historically would have been reserved for them; and by the increased empowerment of women both at home, and in the world at large. In addition to their perceptions of women’s improved socio-economic position as a threat, gender inequality has an added caste and ethnic dimension in Nepal, comparable to what Jaffrelot (2003) describes as a ‘silent revolution’, in the context of the rise of Other Backward Caste in North India. It is possible that traditionally upper-class, higher caste, and locally dominant, social groups are deeply concerned about the economic, political, and
social assertiveness of lower castes, working classes, and marginalised groups, and the threat this poses to their historical privileges.

**Discussing socio-cultural changes and acknowledging diversity**

Most importantly, Nepali women are not a monolithic group of third-world women with no agency and voice subjugated by their male family members. We argue any discussion on gender and power relationships is incomplete without looking at the intersections of caste, culture, religion, economy, social class, language, and family structure, all of which shape social inequalities (Rai 2019; Lotter 2017; Tamang 2009).

For example, the 2011 Nepal Family Health Survey suggests that there is significant variation in the uptake of reproductive health services by women from different castes, and educational and economic backgrounds (Pandey et al 2013). When we carefully examine the improvement in maternal health services in Nepal, firstly, there are profound problems of inequity in health care provision. Women’s reproductive health services, including Emergency Obstetric Care, and Caesarean section facilities, remain unevenly available to, and accessed by women. As such, health outcomes are not wholly determined by healthcare itself. Therefore, there is a need to look at inequities along lines of caste, class, and rural vs. urban residencies. This commentary directs our attention to these social and economic processes.

Additionally, new social orders are increasingly reshaped by the changing political economy, and by exposure to the outside world, with increased mobility within and outside the country, and wider access to communication technology. Yet, not all women and men have experienced such changes uniformly. These differences are
complex, and people living in such diverse social systems for generations have become interdependent and integrated in many ways – making a complex social mosaic. However, there is plenty of evidence in recent years that these differences also are changing at a different pace, and again in different styles. Differences are merging in some instances, and others are further widening, shifting, and adapting to emerging social norms and values.  

**Concluding remarks**

In this article, we have outlined various propositions about the changing gender dynamics along with shifting socio-cultural and economic processes in contemporary Nepal, that can be summarised in four main points.

Firstly, that which is commonly described, as ‘Hindu patriarchy’ works to represent gender disparity as a residual issue of culture and religion in Nepal. Patriarchy is a global phenomenon, deeply rooted in society, and found in most socio-cultural and religious practices. However, this is not intended to defend specific notions of patriarchy found in Hindu societies or State, but to stress that gender inequality is deeply engrained in the political-economic system, sustained by economic policies, development discourses, and colonial mindsets. For Nepal’s context, it is easier to blame Hindu patriarchy, than to understand the other more complex, structural issues surrounding relational aspects of gender dynamics. Of course, there are specificities of gender-based ideologies, rooted in Hindu and caste-based societies in Nepal and South Asia. Focusing exclusively on the Hindu patriarchal social system can take

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9 The mass celebration of Teej, and other Hindu cultural rituals, by an increasing number of Janajati women, not only in Nepal, but also among those living abroad, can make this point. During the Teej festival in summer, for example, women fast and worship lord Shiva for their husbands’ good health and long life. This used to be a Hindu festival, but in recent years it has increasingly become a Nepali women’s festival. We have encountered Nepali men also taking part in celebrating the festival, some even fasting to show gender solidarity.
away our attention from wider structural, and relational issues that perpetuate gender inequalities.

Additionally, we contest the general assumption that replacing the traditional cultural and ritual practices with modern ones will automatically fix the problem. In order to address the real causes of gender inequality and social injustice, we need to address the wider structural issues, including discourses that maintain certain stereotypes.

Secondly, there has been a major political-economic shift and consequent socio-cultural transformation in Nepal, with gendered implications, and for women’s and men’s social roles and positions. Women’s (and men’s) health and education status has improved and rural livelihood strategies are shifting. Mobility has also increased with new meanings attached to it. The call for gender equality and social inclusion is widespread. Therefore, we argue that recirculation of stereotypical discourses of ‘third world women, who lack agency and have no voice, and are confined in a dominant Hindu patriarchal social order’, not only fail to capture the changing gender dynamics in contemporary Nepali society, but also work against a more liberating political space. A more grounded, and up-to-date and critical understanding of gender relations in Nepal is warranted, that neither romanticises nor pathologises Nepali women’s social position. Recent changes in Nepal’s political economy have significantly altered gender dynamics, often at the expense of marginal women and men.

Thirdly, neo-liberal ideology that places a monetary value on most activities, undermines women’s (and men’s) contributions in the domestic sphere, and also more broadly in wider society. Giving a monetary value to invaluable work, such as everyday family care, is simply not possible. However, neo-liberal approaches
consider such important responsibilities unproductive, so those who take domestic roles, and these are usually women, are perceived as an economically unproductive group. If the overall aim of women and men entering the formal labour market, earning money and becoming economically self-reliant and wealthy, is to improve a family’s living standard, women’s or men’s contribution to the overall welfare of the family merits a higher value than money can buy. If a woman (or a man) is looking after children, or taking care of elderly relatives, she/ he is not only directly saving money that could have been for nursery, or care home costs, but also providing a psychologically solid foundation for his/her children or elders. These are not adequately valued and comprehensively discussed in the current literature on gender and policy documents, either nationally in Nepal, or internationally.

Fourthly, men’s changing roles, and their perceptions on ideas of gender equality, have been missing links, and a missed opportunity for too long. With current transformations to Nepal’s political economy, men’s lives, including their perceptions about gender roles and practices are undergoing major changes too. A new generation of men are taking on increasing household responsibilities, and these men are aware of the call for gender equality. They too are adapting to broader social changes. Any discussion on women’s position must therefore consider how men’s gendered roles and perceptions are also undergoing changes, with direct implications for women’s lives and in family dynamics. The pace of change has been unevenly shaped by the intersection of caste, class, ethnicity, and religion. Yet, all these shifts remain underexamined.

In the context of significant shifts in Nepal’s political and economic changes, are men’s ideas on gender relations shifting? Are new-generation Nepali men aware of
their privilege in relation to the historical disadvantage and suffering of women? How can we better understand and present modern Nepali men’s views on this issue?

Scholars and activists working on gender politics in Nepal should also be asking these questions.

We stress that these positive developments on gender issues are encouraging, but not adequate. Gender issues and gender politics need to be discussed continuously, acknowledging positive shifts, and areas needing improvement. International development, advocacy, and gender policy actors can play critical roles in reshaping or changing a certain type of discourses and mindset. It is vital too, that we value the critical role women and men play to raise a family, and the contribution they make to society. It is critical to understand men’s roles to promote a gender-equal and a fair society. We need to be better at documenting changes in gendered roles, and the perceptions of men.

We find appropriate to conclude this commentary by quoting a famous Malawian proverb: ‘if you want to go fast go alone, and if you want to go further go together.’

Taking a whole family as a unit to study, to better understand the gender dynamics within a household, will provide a more realistic understanding, which will take us further in gender equality, or provide a basis for promoting gender equality, not only in Nepal, but also globally.

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